

BACKGROUND

This section is divided into two parts:

- a discussion of the legal status of charter schools and their linkage to other local education agencies (LEAs), and
- a synopsis of federal laws that are most relevant to special education in charter schools.

The content of this section is intended for those readers who may not fully understand the critical importance of a charter school's legal status within a state's public education system, or may not have a working knowledge of, or need a brief update on, federal special education laws and regulations.

Charter School Legal Status and Linkage to an LEA

Introduction

Charter schools must abide by federal special education laws and regulations because they are part of the public education system. However, the way this gets carried out in practice differs widely due to many factors, the most important of which are a charter school's *legal identity* and its *linkage* to a traditional LEA for purposes of special education. Familiarity with these concepts is critical to understanding a charter school's level of responsibility for special education.

How is the public education system structured and how do charter schools fit into it?

The elements of the public education system are:

- the state education agency (SEA);
- school districts (known in many states under different terms such as school district, parish, or LEAs; and
- schools that are part of an LEA.

An LEA is usually defined as an entity that has responsibility for the education of all children who reside within a designated geographical area of a state. Charter schools do not completely fit into this definition since they are schools of choice and have responsibility only for students who are enrolled in the school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its regulations specifically include charter schools in the definition of an LEA: "a public charter school that is established as an LEA under State law" [34 CFR Â§300.18].

The place a charter school occupies in the public education system depends on the charter school's legal identity, usually referred to as a charter school's LEA status. LEA

status is assigned by the state charter school law or other state policy that is legally binding. However, status is not always clearly delineated and a charter school's legal status for special education may be different from its legal status for all other matters. Depending on the state in which it is located, an individual charter school may be classified as:

- a separate LEA, or
- part of another LEA.

In Tennessee, the individual or group that wishes to open a public charter school must file an application with the local board of education. The only authorizer in Tennessee is an LEA and the resultant charter schools is part of that LEA. A public charter school may be formed by creating a new school or converting an eligible public school to charter status.

Why is charter school legal identity for special education important?

The exact nature of a charter school's identity for purposes of special education is important because, under federal requirements, an LEA has many more programmatic and financial responsibilities than a school that is only a part of an LEA. While the state is ultimately responsible for the education of all its resident children, states delegate responsibility to LEAs, e.g., states typically assign the responsibility to their LEAs for providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE). In addition, LEA status determines how funds for special education will flow to the charter school.

How does a charter school's LEA status impact its operations?

The major effect of a charter school's LEA status is the type of linkage that is mandated or voluntarily established between that charter school and a traditional LEA. In other words, a charter school's legal status is reflected in the way it relates to other LEAs. There are three types of linkage:

- **NO LINK:** a charter school that is its own LEA has full responsibility for special education and usually has No-Link to another LEA(although a charter could negotiate some working relationship with an LEA if it chooses to do so);
- **TOTAL LINK:** the charter is considered a part of an LEA and the LEA is responsible for the students with disabilities; and
- **PARTIAL LINK:** the connection between a charter school and an LEA when there is a required or negotiated connection, e.g., the charter school has responsibility for services, but the child's home LEA carries out evaluation team tasks, or the charter school is responsible for only those services that can be delivered in the school and the LEA resumes responsibility when the child needs more specialized day or residential placement.

In Tennessee, a charter school is part of an LEA, but the way special education is carried out in the school may be negotiated with the LEA.

What are the indicators of linkage?

Since there may be a considerable amount of variability in the way linkage is enacted in a specific charter school, the types of linkage can be said to fall along a continuum. Often, the specifics of how linkage will work is described in a contract between a charter school and an LEA. The box below provides one way to determine the type of linkage a particular charter school has with a traditional LEA.

Indicators of a State's Linkage

Note: The term "LEA" in these items refers to a traditional school district and does not mean a charter school that is its own LEA

Yes No

- Does the LEA retain responsibility for student evaluations for special education eligibility?

- Does the LEA maintain or supervise the IEP team to develop, revise and implement a student's IEP and make placement decisions?

- Is the LEA responsible for hiring (or delegating the responsibility for hiring) qualified special education personnel?

- Is the LEA responsible for providing (or delegating responsibility for providing) a full continuum of placements?

- Do all federal, state and local special education dollars designated for charter schools flow through the LEA?

If in describing your state you answered "yes" to most of these statements, your state is most likely a total-link state. Conversely, if you answered "no" to most of these statements, your state is most likely a no-link state. A mixture of "yes" and "no" responses indicates that your state is most likely a partial-link state.

Why is linkage important?

Linkage is important because it determines the way that responsibilities for special education evaluation and services will be carried out. While the widest degree of variability occurs in partial-link situations, assignment of responsibility can also vary in total-link and no-link states. The specifics have to be negotiated between the charter school and the authorizing LEA. Often, some responsibilities are assigned while other operational elements are not. It is critical for a charter school to arrange in advance and commit to writing as clearly as possible an understanding with the LEA(s) to avoid future problems.

Federal Laws Relevant to Special Education in Charter Schools

Introduction

The following brief overview of federal education laws as they pertain to special education is intended to be an orientation for those who are not very familiar with this legislation. Links are included for locating the full text of these laws and/or their regulations.

Which federal laws are most relevant to special education in charter schools?

For charter schools, the federal laws (and their regulations) that have most relevance for implementing special education are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), recently reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (504); the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Are copies of these laws or regulations available on the Internet?

Yes. The links are as follows:

- IDEA: Revisions to the IDEA were enacted in December 2004. A copy of the law (P. L. 108-446) can be downloaded as a PDF here:
http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=108_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ446.108.pdf
- The regulations related to IDEA can be accessed in the Code of Federal Regulations online at
http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_99/34cfr300_99.html. **Note:** This is for the 1999 version of the IDEA regulations that will be revised during 2005-6. They remain in effect except for any item that has been changed by the IDEA amendments of 2004. (State special education regulations are available on most state websites.)

- NCLB: Links to the law, regulations and policy guidance are available online at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/legislation.html#leg>
- 504: Regulations can be found online at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/rights/reg/ocr/edlite-34cfr104.html#D>
- ADA: Regulations and technical assistance are available online at <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/publicat.htm>
- FERPA: An explanation is available online at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

Which federal agency is responsible for overseeing these laws?

In the U. S. Department of Education (ED), the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is in charge of the IDEA, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is responsible for Section 504 and the ADA and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) manages the ESEA and NCLB. The Family Compliance Policy Office provides technical assistance for FERPA requirements.

Do students with disabilities have a federally protected right to attend charter schools?

Yes. Section 504 specifically prohibits discrimination solely on the basis of disability to public and private programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Children who attend charter schools are covered by these civil rights laws in the same way as children in any other public school.

What is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

The IDEA provides federal financial assistance to state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) to guarantee special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities. Every state receives these funds and must follow all of IDEA's specific procedures, including those for an evaluation to determine if students are eligible for special education and the additional requirements for subsequent services and re-evaluation.

What are the basic requirements of IDEA?

The basic requirements, often discussed using a set of acronyms, are:

- **IEP:** A team of professionals and parents arranges for the child's evaluation, determines eligibility, decides on the individualized special education and related services for the child and prepares an individualized education program (IEP) that contains specific content that must be reviewed at least annually. An IEP includes measurable annual goals, how the child will be included in state and district assessments and how the child will access the general education curriculum in order to meet state standards.

- **FAPE:** Students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) provided at no charge to parents.
- **LRE:** The least restrictive environment (LRE) refers to placement in a setting that is the closest to the regular classroom. Students with disabilities must have available to them a continuum of placements that range from full time in a regular classroom to full time in a special setting. They are entitled to be placed in the setting that will meet their individual needs while removing them as little as possible from the regular classroom.

The OSEP website at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/omip.html> provides some information concerning specific requirements of the IDEA.

What does the IDEA say about charter schools?

The 2004 amendments to IDEA continued to affirm that students who attend charter schools are covered under this law. The law makes specific references to charter schools:

- Children with disabilities who attend public charter schools and their parents retain all rights under IDEA.
- Charter schools are included in the definition of an LEA when they are established as LEAs by state law.
- Students with disabilities in charter schools that are part of an LEA must be served in the same manner as that LEA serves children with disabilities in its other schools including that the LEA must provide supplementary and related services on site at the charter school to the same extent to which the local educational agency has a policy or practice of providing such services on the site to its other public schools. The LEA must also provide funds under this part to those charter schools on the same basis as that LEA provides funds to the its other public schools, including proportional distribution based on relative enrollment of children with disabilities, and at the same time as the agency distributes other federal funds to the agency's other public schools, consistent with the state's charter school law.
- A charter school that is its own LEA is responsible for ensuring that the requirements of IDEA are met unless state law assigns that responsibility to some other entity.
- If a charter school is a school of an LEA that receives IDEA funding, the LEA is responsible for ensuring that the requirements are met, unless state law assigns that responsibility to some other entity.
- Charter schools that are LEAs cannot be required to join with other LEAs to establish joint eligibility for funds. (States can require traditional LEAs to join together for funding purposes if they would not be able to establish and maintain programs of sufficient size and scope individually).
- The state special education advisory panel must include a representative of charter schools.

- Special education teachers in charter schools may not have to meet certification requirements in IDEA if their state's charter school law does not require that teachers in charter schools be certified.
- Charter schools that are their own LEAs are specifically included in eligibility to access the resources of an LEA risk pool for high need children with disabilities if the state establishes such a fund.

These specific requirements involve a charter school's *legal status* as an LEA or part of an LEA. See Section I of this Background for a discussion of that concept.

What happens if a parent disagrees with the school about special education?

The IDEA contains procedural safeguards and due process rights for parents in the identification, evaluation and placement of their child. Parents must be provided with prior written notice of these rights. The law put various procedures in place for resolving conflicts between parents and schools at least once a year and at the time they request a due process hearing. Every state must have a formal complaint system and must provide for mediation and due process hearings to settle conflicts.

Are there children with disabilities who may not be covered by IDEA?

Yes. To be eligible under IDEA, children must meet the criteria of one of the specific disability categories as defined in the law. However, children who are not eligible under IDEA may qualify as students with disabilities under Section 504.

How do Section 504 and the ADA differ from IDEA?

Section 504 and the ADA define disability much more broadly than the IDEA. They include any individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities, or who has a record of such an impairment, or who is regarded as having such an impairment. Reasonable accommodations are required by both of these laws and Section 504 goes further by specifically requiring the provision of educational and related aids and services that are designed to meet the individual educational needs of the child. The exact wording of the definitions in the regulations for IDEA and Section 504 are as follows:

• IDEA REGULATIONS:

34 CFR Sec. 300.7 Child with a disability

(A) In general - The term 'child with a disability' means a child --

(i) with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this title as 'emotional disturbance'), orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and

(ii) who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

(B) Child aged 3 through 9 - The term 'child with a disability' for a child aged 3

through 9 (or any subset of that age range, including ages 3 through 5), may, at the discretion of the State and the local educational agency, include a child --

- (i) experiencing developmental delays, as defined by the State and as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in 1 or more of the following areas: physical development; cognitive development; communication development; social or emotional development; or adaptive development; and
- (ii) who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

● **SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973—REGULATIONS:**

34 CFR 104.3

(j) Handicapped persons (1) *Handicapped persons* means any person who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment.

(2) As used in paragraph (j)(1) of this section, the phrase:

(i) *Physical or mental impairment* means (A) any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive, digestive, and/or genitourinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine; or (B) any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities.

(ii) *Major life activities* mean functions such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

What are some examples of disabilities that may be covered under Section 504 but not by the IDEA?

Children who have chronic illnesses such as diabetes, or a physical impairment, such as those connected with cerebral palsy, may require specific accommodations or services, but do not meet the criteria of the IDEA definitions or additional specifications applied through state law. Such children are entitled to an evaluation and to FAPE if they are found to meet the definition of "handicapped person" as specified in the law. A 504 plan is usually written in these cases. Further details are available in the document *Frequently Asked Questions about Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities* available online at www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html?exp=0

Are funds available under Section 504?

No, there are no funds available as part of Section 504 and IDEA funds may not be used to serve children who are eligible only under Section 504.

What requirements about accessibility of facilities do charter schools have to follow?

The state and federal requirements for accessibility of facilities are complex. It is important that authorizers and operators of charter schools have appropriate legal and technical assistance on this topic. Federal regulations can be found online at <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adastd94.pdf>

What parts of NCLB are particularly relevant to students with disabilities?

There are many parts of NCLB that pertain to students with disabilities in charter schools, but the most relevant ones are the accountability requirements related to assessment and highly qualified teachers.

What NCLB assessment requirements pertain to students with disabilities?

Charter schools are subject to the same Title I accountability requirements as other public schools in a state and all state charter laws currently require charter schools to participate in their state's assessment system for public schools. Policy guidance for NCLB says a state's assessment system must be designed to be valid and accessible for use by the widest possible range of students, including students with disabilities and students covered under Section 504. The participation of students with disabilities in such assessments is covered in the IDEA and requires the following:

- Students with disabilities must be included in state and district-wide assessment programs with appropriate accommodations if necessary.
- Alternate assessments must be provided for those children who cannot participate in state and districtwide assessment programs even with accommodations.
- The IEP for all students with disabilities will specify how they will participate in state assessments.

It is important to note that procedures for the inclusion of all students with disabilities in large scale assessments is a developing area of knowledge and practice. Extensive resources on this topic are available at the website of the National Center on Educational Outcomes at <http://www.education.umn.edu/nceo/>

Are students with disabilities included in their state's adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements?

Yes. As stated in NCLB, AYP applies the same high standards of academic achievement to all public elementary and secondary school students in the state. The law also requires selected subgroups, one of which is students with disabilities, to be considered separately under certain conditions in determining whether a school has met AYP targets. An important part of the NCLB regulations, known as "the one percent rule" that applies to students with significant disabilities, was added to the NCLB

regulations in December 2003. The Department of Education has issued a summary of that rule that is available at <http://www.usu.edu/mprrc/workgroups/ci/011404Material1.pdf>

How must students with disabilities be included in NCLB accountability reports?

Students with disabilities is one of the subgroups for which NCLB requires disaggregated reports of assessment results. However, NCLB provides that a state may not use disaggregated data for one or more subgroups to report achievement results if the number of students in those subgroups is insufficient to yield statistically reliable information or if the results would reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student.

Which NCLB teacher qualification requirements pertain to students with disabilities?

It is important to note that the NCLB law does not specifically refer to the teachers who provide special education services - that issue is covered in IDEA. State laws and policies that cover certification for charter schools must be carefully reviewed by everyone involved with charter schools. As mentioned above, the 2004 amendments to IDEA make specific reference to special education teacher certification requirements. The IDEA special education teacher qualification requirements are complex and are quoted in full as follows:

HIGHLY QUALIFIED:

- (A) IN GENERAL - For any special education teacher, the term 'highly qualified' has the meaning given the term in section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, except that such term also --
 - (i) includes the requirements described in subparagraph (B); and
 - (ii) includes the option for teachers to meet the requirements of section 9101 of such Act by meeting the requirements of subparagraph (C) or (D).

- (B) REQUIREMENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS - When used with respect to any public elementary school or secondary school special education teacher teaching in a State, such term means that --
 - (i) the teacher has obtained full State certification as a special education teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification), or passed the State special education teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in the State as a special education teacher, except that when used with respect to any teacher teaching in a public charter school (emphasis added), the term means that the teacher meets the requirements set forth in the State's public charter school law;
 - (ii) the teacher has not had special education certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis; and
 - (iii) the teacher holds at least a bachelor's degree.

- (C) SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TEACHING TO ALTERNATE ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS - When used with respect to a special education teacher who teaches core academic subjects exclusively to children who are assessed against alternate achievement standards established under the regulations promulgated under section 1111(b)(1) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, such term means the teacher, whether new or not new to the profession, may either --
 - (i) meet the applicable requirements of section 9101 of such Act for any elementary, middle, or secondary school teacher who is new or not new to the profession; or
 - (ii) meet the requirements of subparagraph (B) or (C) of section 9101(23) of such Act as applied to an elementary school teacher, or, in the case of instruction above the elementary level, has subject matter knowledge appropriate to the level of instruction being provided, as determined by the State, needed to effectively teach to those standards.

- (D) SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TEACHING MULTIPLE SUBJECTS - When used with respect to a special education teacher who teaches 2 or more core academic subjects exclusively to children with disabilities, such term means that the teacher may either --
 - (i) meet the applicable requirements of section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 for any elementary, middle, or secondary school teacher who is new or not new to the profession;
 - (ii) in the case of a teacher who is not new to the profession, demonstrate competence in all the core academic subjects in which the teacher teaches in the same manner as is required for an elementary, middle, or secondary school teacher who is not new to the profession under section 9101(23)(C)(ii) of such Act, which may include a single, high objective uniform State standard of evaluation covering multiple subjects; or
 - (iii) in the case of a new special education teacher who teaches multiple subjects and who is highly qualified in mathematics, language arts, or science, demonstrate competence in the other core academic subjects in which the teacher teaches in the same manner as is required for an elementary, middle, or secondary school teacher under section 9101(23)(C)(ii) of such Act, which may include a single, high objective uniform State standard of evaluation covering multiple subjects, not later than 2 years after the date of employment.

- (E) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION - Notwithstanding any other individual right of action that a parent or student may maintain under this part, nothing in this section or part shall be construed to create a right of action on behalf of an individual student or class of students for the failure of a particular State educational agency or local educational agency employee to be highly qualified.

- (F) DEFINITION FOR PURPOSES OF THE ESEA - A teacher who is highly qualified under this paragraph shall be considered highly qualified for purposes of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.