

# Promoting Access & Choice Through **Inclusive** Language

Ensuring families of students with disabilities feel welcome in  
Colorado charter schools

## **This module was created & presented by:**

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## **The purposes of this training module:**

- To educate public charter school staff on their obligation to enroll and educate students with disabilities.
- To provide talking points that will ensure their communication with parents aligns to anti-discrimination policies and State and Federal requirements.

# Why is this important NOW?

- [Recent study](#) conducted by the Center for Learner Equity identified that Colorado Public Charter Schools ranked the lowest in the nation for the percentage of SwDs enrolled.
- In the last few months, an advocacy group filed [31 Office of Civil Rights \(OCR\) complaints regarding charter schools using language during the admissions and application process violates OCR guidance.](#)
- Special education enrollment continues to be a topic used in charter school renewal decisions.



# Remember...

- Colorado charter schools are public schools and receive federal dollars to educate Students with Disabilities (SwDs).
- This means ALL Colorado charter schools are required to enroll and educate SwDs.
- Local authorizers determine the level of severity of disability a charter school is required to enroll.
- AT LEAST 90% of SwDs should be able to be educated by the public school they choose include charter schools.

# Communication should accomplish the following purposes:

## AFFIRM

### COMMITMENT

Affirm the charter school's commitment to WELCOME & not discriminate against SwDs

## PROVIDE

### DIRECTION

Direct families that have questions about special education to knowledgeable and trained staff at the school

Ultimately,

# AVOID

**miscommunicating, discouraging enrollment, or asking for learning plans or plan details PRIOR to enrollment.**

## OFFER

### RESOURCES

Provide high-quality resources from the state and other authorities to help them navigate school choice

## COMMUNICATE

### CLEARLY

Clearly communicate to families about the details of the enrollment process without creating any unintended obstacles



# Front Office Talking Points...

Instead of..

*“We are not a good fit for all students”*

Align to your school’s  
**ANTI DISCRIMINATION  
STATEMENT**

*“Charter schools are public schools. Like all charter schools, (insert school name) doesn’t discriminate against students in any “protected subgroup/list”. We welcome applications from all students, including students with disabilities! That means we don’t discriminate on the basis of disability, race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, ancestry, or need for special education services.”*

# Front Office Talking Points...

Instead of..

*“We are a charter school, we don’t have to do what the district does”*

Alignment to  
**STATE & FEDERAL  
LAWS**

*“Like all charter schools, (insert school name), is a public school. (Insert school name) educates students with disabilities and English Language Learners and provides services to students as required by state and federal law. In most cases, we can provide the services required for a student with a disability as outlined in their IEP.”*

# Front Office Talking Points...

Instead of..

*“We individualize education for every kid, so a lot of kids don’t need their old IEP.”*

Align to

**STATE & FEDERAL  
LAWS**

*“Under IDEA, students with disabilities are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The services a student requires under IDEA are described in an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The details of that program are addressed by a student’s IEP team, of which you (a parent) are a member.”*



# Front Office Talking Points...

Instead of..

*“We don’t have kids with that level of need at our school, the district serves them.”*

Align to

## STATE & FEDERAL LAWS

*“Under Colorado law, the provision of FAPE and specific services required by a student’s IEP are a joint responsibility of the charter school and its authorizing school district (or the Charter School Institute). After a student with an IEP is initially admitted, an IEP team meeting, which would include the parent, (and the student and their representative as appropriate), may be used to review the IEP with the family and to determine if additional support from the LEA is required.*

# Front Office Talking Points...

Instead of..

*“I don’t think we do that”*

*or*

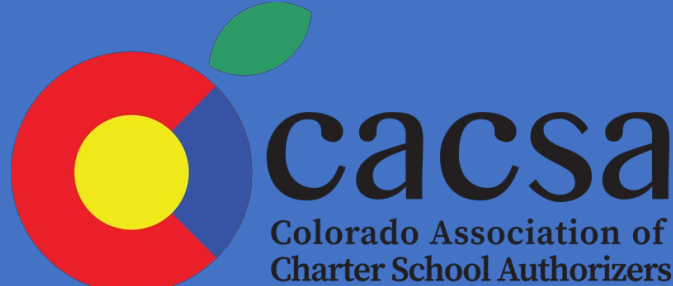
*“We haven’t done that since I was hired”*

Directions to your school’s

**SPECIAL EDUCATION  
LEAD**

*“If you have more questions about how we serve students with disabilities, I can get you in touch with our (insert appropriate title/director of special education).”*

# There are resources to support & guide you!



## Promoting Access & Choice Through Inclusive Language: Ensuring families of students with disabilities feel welcome in Colorado charter schools

In Colorado, many families of students with disabilities choose their student's public school. Unfortunately, these families often have information about their options. Parents often reach out to their surrounding schools to learn about the school and the enrollment process. To prepare for these interactions, schools are encouraged to have resources readily available, and staff should be trained to respond appropriately to educate families about their choices and to avoid miscommunication and discrimination.

Communication between parents and staff at a charter school needs to accurately reflect how non-discrimination policies and programs for special populations apply to the school. School staff communicating with parents of prospective students should be trained in how to appropriately address issues related to students with disabilities. School communication should clarify that the school welcomes their interest and must not discourage families of students with disabilities from enrolling. After interacting with a charter school, families should know that the school welcomes students with learning differences and will not discriminate against their student during the enrollment process, and that their student will receive the services they require if they attend the school.

This document provides information and examples to assist charter school staff as they prepare to communicate with parents. It includes goals of communication, considerations that staff should keep in mind, and a series of Frequently Asked Questions that provide concrete examples of best practices. Additional resources are available through the Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers and the Collaborative for Exceptional Education at the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

### Special Education Communication Goals for Charter Schools & Authorizers

Communications from charter schools and districts should accomplish several purposes, including:

- Conduct the entire enrollment process without asking about disability status. Prior to enrollment, nothing in the communication should ask about a student's disability status or services related to a disability or indirectly encourage a family to disclose a student's disability status;

## Charter School Website Language & Students with Disabilities

Many charter schools serve students with disabilities very well. However, a [review of charter school websites](#) in Colorado conducted by the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSCECS) found that many charter school websites could improve their communication to parents of prospective students with disabilities.

The study, which included nearly all Colorado charter schools, found:

- 61 percent lack descriptions of how they enroll students with disabilities;
- 48 percent lack descriptions of how they enroll students overall;
- 63 percent do not describe how they educate students with disabilities;
- 10 percent publish enrollment policies with elements that could be interpreted as exclusionary and did not have any anti-discrimination clauses; and
- 18 percent of application forms ask whether a student has a disability with no anti-discrimination clauses or statements of purpose to help parents understand how information might impact applications.

There are Colorado charter schools and examples nationally that use their websites effectively to communicate with parents of students with disabilities. Strong charter school websites include a concise message affirming their non-discriminatory nature as well as a commitment to enroll and provide services for special populations. Descriptions of programs and enrollment procedures are presented in more detail in linked pages that explain appropriate procedures and do so in a way that does not discourage applicants while accurately explaining their procedures and approach. Websites should also direct interested families to contact the designated school department or staff who are trained and able to handle all questions about special education appropriately.

Accurately and appropriately addressing the specifics of placement decisions, especially for students with moderate to severe needs can be a communication challenge. Addressing these details should not prevent a school from clearly signaling the intent and ability to appropriately serve students with disabilities. This topic of concern may be best addressed in direct communication between families and experts at the school and district.

The following resources were developed to support charter schools, including:

- [Model Charter School Website Language](#)
- [Criterion for Evaluating Charter Websites](#)
- [Examples of Charter School Website Language](#)



Created in collaboration by  
Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA)  
& CLCE's Collaborative for Exceptional Education



## Special Education Enrollment Review

### Overview

Some schools are challenged to serve students with disabilities at the same rate and with the same quality as other schools. Many factors contribute to these challenges, and the League's Enrollment Review is the perfect tool in supporting schools in identifying and addressing root causes. Schools receive a thorough picture of their programming strengths, goals, and barriers that could be contributing to low special education enrollment numbers through the use of interviews, observations, a school website review, handbook and policies evaluation, and an examination of existing plans and data.

The program concludes with each school receiving a customized and detailed report that includes strengths, opportunities, and recommendations for future action. This program can be delivered online or virtually depending on your needs and preferences.

Pricing: \$3,300  
(FREE for non-pilot schools)



**Scheduling:** To discuss details or schedule a Special Education Enrollment Review, contact Alex Coats at 303-989-8358 or [acoats@coloradoleague.org](mailto:acoats@coloradoleague.org).

The Special Education Enrollment Review includes:  
Two days of off-site and two days of onsite work, encompassing one or two special education requests, depending on the size and scope of your program;  
Review of existing data and school performance;  
Review of IEPs, website, staff and parent handbooks;  
Review of your enrollment and application communications;  
Survey, interviews and observations;  
Detailed findings with the school, and;  
Detailed Executive Summary that includes strengths, areas for improvement, levels of risk based on compliance indicators, and recommended action plan for addressing areas of concern.



## Reach out for more resources & support

[exceptional@coloradoleague.org](mailto:exceptional@coloradoleague.org)

## **Remember...**

**You are often the first point of contact for families of students with disabilities and YOU have the power to build a bridge for these families or build a wall.**

**These families already have enough walls.**

**Be a bridge builder!**