Why they choose and how it goes: Comparing special education and general education cyber student perceptions

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ABSTRACT

While critics offer concerns that cyber charter schools under-enroll special education students, such schools may offer advantages for these students, and some cyber schools have identified this market niche. Little is known about such schools. We surveyed parents ($n = 232$; 48.7% response rate) and students ($n = 269$; 53.7% response rate) at a cyber charter school that we will call SunTech, where special education students account for 26% of the student body. Findings indicate that special education students and their parents were more likely than general education peers to mention behavioral issues as influencing their decision to choose SunTech. Compared to general education counterparts, special education students and parents reported somewhat higher levels of satisfaction in the school and somewhat lower levels of satisfaction in their prior schools. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Cyber schools generally and cyber charter schools in particular are growing rapidly, with roughly two million k-12 students taking online courses and over 250,000 enrolled full time in online courses (Queen & Lewis, 2011; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012) – rapid growth since 2000 (Clark, 2001). Cyber charter schools teach courses entirely or primarily online, and offer potential advantages including flexible schedules and a broader range of courses than would normally be feasible for teachers and students who are not tied to a geographic location. Cyber charter schooling can also serve students who have physical or other disabilities that may hinder them from regularly attending classes. Asynchronous cyber charter schooling offers lessons at the learner's convenience, empowering students with young children or jobs to continue their education and providing more learning time for those who need it. Cyber charter schooling can also offer a refuge for students who have been bullied in other schools (Beck, Maranto, & Lo, 2013). By limiting commuting demands and reducing the need for brick and mortar facilities, cyber charter schooling can increase efficiency and promote the green economy (Peterson, 2010; Watson et al., 2012). While many traditional public schools offer online courses, charter schools are a significant part of the cyber movement since their autonomy allows innovation without the support of school boards, traditional bureaucracies, school superintendents, and teachers unions, all of which often view cyber learning with suspicion (Moe & Chubb, 2009; Peterson, 2010). As schools of choice, charters have some ability to depart from the traditional model of what Tyack and Cuban (1995) call a "real school," that is, the sort of school attended in person by teachers and students.

While cyber charter schooling has potential advantages, it also poses challenges. Many online charter schools are for-profit ventures, and social justice intellectuals question whether public schooling should be run by profit seeking enterprises (works within Kovacs, 2011). As an empirical matter, Maranto (2005) cast doubt on whether for-profit schooling is effective. Glass, Welner, and Bathon (2011) argue the growth in cyber charter schooling undermines accountability, outstripping the capacity of existing regulators. Cyber charter schools struggle with relationships and with constructing extra-curricular activities in online environments. Further, these schools serve roughly half the percentages of special education students as in traditional public schools (Watson et al., 2012).

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1.1. Charter schools and special education

Because many fully online schools are charter schools, research on the representativeness of special education students in online learning environments can be informed by the more developed literature on special education in charter schools generally.

At first glance, it may appear that charter schools under-enroll special education students but a more in-depth analysis of the existing research on this topic reveals a more nuanced reality.

As a sector, charter schools enroll a mean of 10.6% special education students, compared to 11.51% in traditional public schools; with charters serving only a third as many "low incidence disabilities such as retardation and autism" (Rhim & Kowal, 2008, 8–9). These figures may lead one to think that many charter schools are practicing selective admissions and screening out special education students but it is important to consider at least three nuances when interpreting these data. First, traditional public schools are far larger and better funded than charter schools (Gross & Lake, 2012; Maranto & McShane, 2012; Winters, 2013), meaning that charters may lack the resources and economies of scale to serve certain high-need special education students adequately. Accordingly, charter supporter Keegan (2001) and charter skeptic Hager (2001) argue that special education parents are not discouraged by charters so much as drawn to traditional public schools. Second, special education categories such as learning, speech and language disabilities can be arbitrary, with parents and school officials seeking to classify or declassify individual students for a variety of reasons, including avoiding paperwork, offering particular services, withholding particular services to save money, or isolating individual students–even though the latter is typically illegal. Parents often lobby to avoid special education labels they consider stigmatizing (Ong-Dean, 2009; Valle, 2009), and sometimes choose charter schools without informing them of the student's prior status (Lake, 2010). It is not clear whether the latter harms children (Nugent, 2012). Finally, funding regimes push traditional public schools to over-label students. Wolf, Witte, and Fleming (2012) studied Milwaukee students who switched sectors, finding that traditional public schools were roughly 50% more likely to classify a given student as requiring special education services than were nearby private schools. Some private schools are reluctant to "label" students for philosophical reasons, and our fieldwork suggests that such views are also found among charter operators. In contrast public school officials may seek special education designation in borderline cases to gain additional funding. Nationally, Greene (2005) offers evidence that states with "bounty" funding schemes account for a disproportionate share of the growth in special education enrollments nationally.

For those charter school students who are labeled as special education students, it is possible to compare how charter and district schools differentially serve their needs. Such research does not clearly indicate that one sector better serves students. One potential outcome of interest in such comparisons of sectors is parental participation in the special education student's learning program. Though parental participation is formalized through the IEP (Individual Education Plan) process, educators often use their professional status, knowledge of the regulations, and cumbersome language to intimidate rather than partner with parents, subverting the intent of special education legislation. This is particularly true for low income parents. In contrast, elite parents often hire attorneys, advocates, and psychiatric professionals to extract additional services from schools (Ong-Dean, 2009; Valle, 2009). Small size and a parental focus may enable charter schools to better serve all special needs students and parents by permitting less bureaucratic relationships (works within Lake, 2010; Yancey, 2000; works within Milliman & Maranto, 2009; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). Another potential outcome of interest in sector comparisons is family satisfaction with the child's learning experiences. Students exhibit greater subjective well being in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2001). Similarly, parent surveys in Denver and Milwaukee indicate that parents of special needs students report greater satisfaction with charter schools than with their prior traditional public schools, and few report being discouraged from attending charters because of their children's disability status (O'Brien & Hupfeld, 2009).

In short, research indicates that the degree to which special education students are under-represented in charter schools is uncertain. For those special education students who are labeled as such, charter schools appear to have positive impacts on student and parental satisfaction with the child's learning environment and the potential for positive impacts on parental participation in the child's learning program. No research to date, however, has compared the reasons general and special education students and parents choose cyber charter schools, nor how each cohort evaluates those schools. The rest of this paper presents such a study.

1.2. The potential of cyber learning

The unique environment created by cyber charter schools could improve outcomes for special education students by addressing the primary weaknesses of traditional brick and mortar schools. The primary benefit of online learning is its potential to disrupt and transform the longstanding concept of a real school into a new, more student-centered and individualized model (Moe & Chubb, 2009), which can be particularly impactful for students with special needs. It may also reframe schooling for these students, who experience relatively poor academic performance and high dropout rates in traditional public schools, reflecting poor relationships with teachers, low self-esteem, and discipline problems (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Kortering & Braziel, 1999). Many high ability special education students under-perform academically (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002), largely since they fail to connect with school staff (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010). Though still under-represented, students with disabilities are more frequently choosing virtual schools (Rhim & Kowal, 2008), which may reflect a growing awareness of the potential for cyber charter schools to serve this category of students.

Online learning environments have a number of unique features that may make them particularly suitable for students with special educational needs. Such environments enable teachers to individualize instruction through software packages, meeting the needs of students at a range of ability levels and of varying learning styles. It can provide immediate, real time feedback to teachers, enabling them to adjust lessons to serve student needs. Online learning can also offer students immediate feedback (Willingham, 2009). Asynchronous online courses permit students to proceed at an individualized pace. Our fieldwork suggests particular possibilities for special education students. For example, a cyber charter school teacher we interviewed argued that cyber learning offers advantages, particularly for ADHD students:

> We can get more done academically because there's no lunch break, no moving from class to class, no disruption from disciplinary situations, no walking the kids to and from the bus or study hall, no calling roll since the software does it automatically, so that leaves more one-on-one instructional time….You can also take advantage of kids' enthusiasm. In science class in a regular school, let's say a kid