

The National Education Policy Center recently published a review, authored by professor Bruce Baker of Rutgers University, critiquing our study of special education and charter schools in New York. He misrepresented what we wrote and makes assumptions about what we really wanted to say. That critique was also based on unfavorable -- and erroneous -- assumptions about our motives.

We wrote what we intended to write, neither more nor less. We began by looking at the most basic comparisons (statewide charter to district numbers) and found very clearly that, as the recent GAO report found, charter schools in New York enroll, overall, smaller (by about three percentage points) numbers of students with special needs.

We then explored whether these findings apply equally to charter schools at different grade levels, in different parts of the states, and under different authorizers. We found that the overall averages don't tell the whole story. At the middle and high school levels, for example, charter schools enroll students with special needs at almost identical rates as district-run schools. We also found that, just like district-run schools, charter schools in New York vary tremendously in the numbers of special-needs students they serve.

We wrote that these findings shed important light on the complexity of special education provisions in both the charter and district-run public schools, and laid out a number of unresolved questions that require further research. We also wrote that there can be many reasons why schools – both charter and district-run – serve different numbers of special education children and suggested that proposals to impose fixed quotas on all charter schools could do more harm than good.

We also pointed out issues that the data available would not let us answer but require further research – for example, that we could not assess severity of disability. Baker accused us of deliberately omitting severity of disability in order to bias the results.

We strongly believe that research should be designed to help policymakers understand complex issues, create smart solutions to problems where they exist, and shine light on opportunities for improving equitable access and outcomes for students with special needs, not as a tool for a war of rhetoric and blame-placing.

To that end we concluded that “Ensuring equal access and appropriate services is likely to require the efforts of leaders in states, authorizers, school districts, and the charter sector. A clearer understanding will empower all these actors, including charter school operators, to take the necessary actions to ensure equal access to charter schools for all students and to high-quality special education and related services for students with disabilities.” Nowhere did we conclude, as Baker suggests, that charter schools should be exempt from scrutiny.

Special education in charter schools is an extremely important issue, about which too little is known. Our research takes one small step, but there must be many more. We expect others to criticize our work and point out questions that need more work. But no one benefits from critiques that put words in authors' mouths or attribute bias to limitations caused by lack of data.

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