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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the challenges that charter school administrators in one state experienced in their workings with special needs students, and provide some insight into similar challenges that might occur when establishing special education programs in these innovative settings. Recommendations are offered to provide guidance to administrators who may find themselves in charge of start-up charter schools and who may not have expertise with special education program issues.

Since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991, there has been an explosion in the number of these types of "alternative" educational facilities in the United States. According to the Center for Education Reform, as of fall 2005, there were approximately 3,600 charter schools educating upwards of 1 million students (Center for Education Reform, 2005). Charter schools are public schools that are operated under a contract or "charter" between the school and a "sponsor" which is typically a university, or in some cases, individual citizens or other institutions such as a public school district or civic group. The reasons that charter schools are initially organized are as varied as the types of schools that are now in existence. In many instances, groups of parents have felt disenfranchised by school administrators or feel that the local schools and their state-mandated curricula are doing an inadequate job in providing meaningful educational experiences to children. Other reasons often cited for the establishment of a charter school include that the parents or interested parties want to realize a vision for the school, to gain autonomy over the control of myriad educational issues, to serve a "special" population of students, financial reasons, and, in some cases, to simply increase the likelihood of parental involvement in school matters (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Charter schools are in essence experiments that have grown out of what has come to be known as the Educational Reform Movement. Over a decade ago, Hassel (1999) observed that the proliferation of charter school has resulted from, and is the apex of, several noted trends in the school reform literature. These include the push for school choice, sometimes referred to as the "voucher movement"; the idea of competition between schools, thus breaking a school district's monopoly over who can provide the better education; school-based management or decentralizing control of schools and thereby giving more decision-making power to those closest to the classroom; deregulation, which would free schools from adhering to many of the rules and regulations that often constrain educators in how they conduct day-to-day business; and finally, accountability for results by setting high academic standards and imposing consequences for failing to meet these expectations (pp 4-5). But while charter schools have held promise for establishing autonomy and providing students with an education that might be seen as innovative, state and federal laws have not allowed them to circumvent existing mandates to provide students with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. Under federal laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), charter schools may not exclude children with disabilities from attending a charter school and are required to provide these children with an education in the same manner as would be expected of a traditional public school.

Relatively little research exists on the extent to which charter schools are fulfilling their mandate to provide FAPE to students with disabilities attending charter schools. The literature that does exist in this area has not provided clear trends, and perhaps has provided ambiguous results, as to how charter schools provide for the educational needs of students with disabilities. For example, several studies have noted that special education students are often not admitted to some charter schools because they do not meet certain vague and perhaps seemingly arbitrary admission standards. Those students that are admitted may be "counseled out" or simply do not re-enroll because they "do not fit" the mission of the school (McKinney, 1996; Ramanathan, & Zollers, 1999; Watkins, 1999). Walsh (2001) noted that in one instance the San Francisco, California, Board of Education sought to terminate its contract with a for-profit management group that operated charter schools because of, among other things, allegations that the management company tried to limit the number of special needs students because they are costly to educate and would cut into the profits made by the company.

Failure to admit students with disabilities to charter schools is but one of many discouraging trends in the available literature. Many charter schools do not occupy what might be considered "traditional" school building facilities. Often purchasing or leasing whatever facilities and equipment that are available in order to get started, charter school boards have used buildings such as community centers, vacant warehouses, and even old service station garages to conduct classes. Many of these facilities are not designed to be "school buildings." Some charter schools have been found to be in direct violation of city occupancy codes and many often do not meet even the most basic requirements for accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Creno, 1998; Fiore & Cashman, 1999). Other problems noted include lack of psychologists and certificated special education staff; failure to implement existing IEPs or develop new ones; failure to design programs or services to meet individual needs thus taking a "one size fits all" approach; failure to provide parents with due process procedures or procedural safeguards; failure to follow laws when imposing discipline such as suspensions to students with disabilities, and; general building code violations (Fiore & Cashman, 1999; McLaughlin, 1996; National Education Association, 1998; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998).

While there are numerous examples of charter schools not adequately meeting the needs of students with disabilities, there is also evidence that some charter schools are doing at least an acceptable job of educating children and youth with disabilities. Fiore and Cashman (1999) as well as others (Lange & Lehr, 2000; McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000; Zigmond, 1999) have found that students with disabilities fare as well in charter schools, academically and socially, as they would in traditional public schools.

Zigmond (1999) has been particularly vocal in her criticism of attacks on charter schools in the literature and has observed that charter schools may in fact be ahead of traditional public schools in implementing full inclusion for all students with disabilities. Lange and Lehr (2000) interviewed 600 parents of students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools in Minnesota. These parents reported that they were satisfied with the education that their special needs children had received and that they had sought out charter schools to serve their children because of the schools' smaller class sizes, close proximity to home, and a caring attitude on the part of the faculty and staff.

The most notable investigation to date of charter schools and their ability to serve the needs of exceptional children and youth was a national study spearheaded by Fiore (Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnigan, 2000) and has provided a cross-section of what has transpired nationally in charter schools with respect to students with disabilities. While the study sample was somewhat limited in size (N=32 schools), the results present a concise depiction of charter schools in terms of their facilities, curriculum and instruction, staffing and leadership, students, and parental involvement. As in other studies focusing on charter schools and students with disabilities, mixed results are juxtaposed and few definitive

conclusions about the general success of charter schools in educating students with disabilities are apparent.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the challenges that charter school administrators in one state have experienced in meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities, and to provide some insight as to the challenges which might be expected when establishing special education programs in similar settings. As researchers continue to contribute to the professional dialogue in this area, patterns should emerge that will reveal to administrators and teachers in charter schools what truly is "best practice" in providing services to students with disabilities in alternative educational venues.

## **METHOD**

### **Data Collection Instrument**

An interview protocol was developed for the study that was divided into four sections. The first section included items related to demographic features of the school and the population of special needs students in attendance. The second section sought to obtain information as to how services are provided to the schools' population of students with disabilities (ie., self-contained classrooms, regular classrooms, resource rooms, itinerant services). The third section required the participants to respond to open-ended questions and describe problems that they had experienced in providing Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as required under federal law, particularly Public Law 107-15, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEIA). The last section asked the respondents to identify challenges they might expect to encounter in the next five years based upon what they had previously experienced, and learned, over the preceding two years. These final two sections were of the greatest interest for the present study as the authors were attempting to discover what proved to be the most significant challenges for the administrators as they provided FAPE to the students with special needs in an alternative setting.

### **Subjects and Setting**

The subjects for the study included the building administrators for 16 of the 21 charter schools in the state of Missouri. Three of the charter schools in the Kansas City area that are operated by for-profit corporations declined to participate. Two other schools did not return requests for their participation in the study. Missouri's Charter School legislation allows for charter schools to exist only in the metropolitan areas of Kansas City and St. Louis. Kansas City has a total of 17 schools, while St. Louis has only 4. Three of the charter schools in the St. Louis area are operated by a for-profit corporation. Two of these schools are located in large buildings that had once been owned by the federal government as part of the General Accounting Office. The third is located on the grounds of a former state-run facility for people with developmental disabilities. The fourth charter school in St. Louis is located in a renovated former business near the central part of the city and is operated by a board that has no ties to for-profit educational companies. Most of the charter schools in the Kansas City area are located in buildings that were at one time owned by the Kansas City, Missouri, Public School District or by parochial schools and churches. Five of the Kansas City charter schools are operated by two separate for-profit corporations. The children who attend the charter schools in both Kansas City and St. Louis are predominantly minority students (85.8%) and based upon free and reduced lunch figures, most (75%) are from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and families.

## Design and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information pertaining to how the charter schools served the population of special needs children that attended their schools, what obstacles had been encountered in establishing special education programs, and what the administrators perceived as challenges to providing continued services in the near future. Data were collected for the study via face-to-face interviews with the principals of the charter schools. All meetings were tape recorded in order to clarify any responses and to facilitate the flow of discussion during the interview encounters. Interviews took place during the spring of 2001 and were conducted in the administrators' offices located in the charter schools. All interview questions were read to the subjects and answers were recorded verbatim by one or more of the investigators. In some instances, other school personnel such as special educators or clerical staff were present during the interviews. The investigators were aware of the need to be accurate in their interpretations of the responses and continually checked for accuracy by engaging the participants in active feedback and corroborated any interpretations of the information during the interview process.

## Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed over a three-month period following the last interview in early June 2001. The researchers jointly reviewed the tapes of the interviews while examining their hand-written notes in order to arrive at consensus as to what the participant meant and to construct distinct categories as patterns of responses became readily apparent. Due to the small number of participants in this investigation and the types of questions asked, the authors realized pre-hoc that formal quantitative statistics could not be used to convey the obtained results in a meaningful manner. As such, it was decided that only qualitative data analysis should be used to discuss results. This approach is warranted when the data generated requires sensitivity to detail and context, accurate access to information, and ways of rigorously exploring themes and discovering patterns that may not be readily testable with quantitative statistical methods.

## RESULTS

Student enrollment in the charter schools studied ranged from 83 students in the smallest school to 575 students in the largest. All of the charter schools studied accepted students with disabilities that were eligible for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The number of students with disabilities served in the charter schools ranged from one student to fifty-six students. There was an overall prevalence rate of 7.2% of the schools' total student populations that received special education and related services. This is well below the national prevalence rate of between 12-14% for all students with disabilities in all educational placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Table 1 compares the prevalence rates of the special education population in the charter schools that were investigated to the national prevalence rates.

**Table 1.**

Comparison of Prevalence Rates of Students in Charter School  
Special Education Categories to National Prevalence Rates

Category	Charter School (# of Students)	Percent of Charter School Popula- tion*	**National Average (Percent of total public school population)
LD	161	3.7	5.5
Speech or Language	71	1.6	5.0
MR	40	1.0	1.4
BD / ED	23	.5	0.8
Others	19	.4	1.8
Total SPED	314	7.2%	14.5

\*Total student population in charter schools = 4,389

\*\* SOURCE: Elementary and Secondary School Compliance Reports. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (1999). Washington, DC: Author.

When the total number of students with disabilities in the charter schools included in this study is disaggregated by categories of exceptionality, the figures closely approximate the numbers that are found for all public schools nationally. Table 2 presents this information.

**TABLE 2**

Comparison of  
Categories of IDEA Students Served in Charter Schools  
With National Average

Category	Charter School (# of IDEA Students)	Charter School (% of IDEA) n = 314	National Average* (% of total IDEA Students in all Categories)
LD	161	51%	51.0%
Speech /lang.	71	23%	19.4%
MR	40	13%	11.0%
BD / ED	23	7%	8.4%
Others	19	6%	10.2%
Total SPED	314	100%	100%

\*SOURCE: To Assure the Free Appropriate Public Education of All Children with Disabilities: The Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act. U.S. Department of Education (2000). Washington, DC: Author.

## Service Delivery

The service delivery option employed most frequently by the charter schools in the study was "regular classroom with supplemental aides and services." Forty-three percent of the administrators indicated that the regular classroom was the most appropriate for the "types of children that are present" in the charter schools. Other options included Resource Room (28%), Self-Contained (7%), and Itinerant (3%). According to the respondents, 5% of students were served in classrooms in which no supplemental aides or services were being offered to meet the students' needs. Common statements noted several times by the investigators involved the justification for the extensive use of the regular classroom as the chief service delivery option. Comments such as "Inclusion was the option that we selected to use simply because it is the correct thing to do" and "All children should be given the opportunity to be with their peers without singling them out for additional instruction outside of the classroom" were heard repeatedly in the schools that were visited. In some instances, it became almost a mantra or rationalization for choosing inclusive education as the delivery option of choice. One respondent replied:

We have selected to serve our special students in the regular classroom for a number of reasons, the first of which being it is the law. The second reason is that we are providing quality education to *all* [italics added] of our students and our teachers are able to meet the needs of these children without subjecting them to removal from the classroom. And finally, these students will be tested on the state test and they need to be in the classroom that teaches them the material that will be on the tests.

The fact that many of the schools investigated had only a very small number of special educators on staff to meet the needs of rather large numbers of children in some instances was seldom mentioned by the administrators. Special educators were rationed out among the regular classes to see to the needs of a very diverse, and sometimes large, caseload of students. Additionally, it seemed as if some of these administrators had been led to believe that the only service delivery option available to them was full inclusion, when in fact, a full continuum of options was available if the human and fiscal resources were there to allow those options to exist. It perhaps was viewed by some of the administrators as more monetarily and administratively expedient to serve students with exceptional needs in the one placement option that appeared to be both socially palatable and economically more efficient.

## Start-Up Challenges

The interviewers posed the following statement to the administrators in the study: "Describe the three greatest challenges that your school has encountered in providing services to children with special needs." The responses to this statement, with only slight variation, fell into four distinct categories. These categories, those for which more than half of the respondents identified as presenting difficulties in establishing their programs, included Time/Paperwork, Employing Certificated Faculty, Resources (money, space, materials), and Provision of a Full Continuum of Services. These issues are discussed further.

### *Time and Paperwork.*

Of all of the hurdles that the charter school administrators encountered when providing services to special needs students, none was cited more often than the burden of state/federal paperwork and the time needed to see that all programs were in place and in compliance. Two examples from opposite sides of the state express the general sentiment of the entire group of respondents interviewed:

The greatest challenge was just getting started. Having to find out everything, having to create the *whole* [italics added] program. Finding out who I needed, what I needed. The sheer number of

hours involved. It was just overwhelming. I have a background in special education, but to try to do it all, everything; I just felt so inadequate. It all got done, but I had to relearn everything I knew about special education.

Another administrator noted:

Paperwork! Like everyone else. We try to do as little of it as we can. I think that, in a lot of cases, it is simply an understanding of children with special needs. My teachers are not having a problem with special needs children. They understand that the very *mission* [italics added] of this school is to take children who, for whatever reason, are at risk of failing in regular "public" education, and get them ready to succeed in high school. We have children here who basically did not even go to school in the last year and now they *want* [italics added] to come to school. But spending time on paperwork instead of time teaching these kids is just plain ridiculous! We do as little as possible and enough to get by.

#### *Employing Certificated Faculty.*

There is a shortage of certificated special education teachers nation-wide. This has been a recognized problem for a number of years, and it was being keenly felt by the administrators of the charter schools in this study. Teacher burnout, attrition, the heavy caseloads associated with teaching in the special education field, paperwork, and long hours contribute to the problem of finding certificated special education teachers. Those that are available are often drawn to schools that offer greater monetary inducements and job security, both of which are sometimes absent in charter schools. Charter schools must often operate on a limited budget, and because all charter schools in this state are subject to the scrutiny of sponsors who demand accountability for achievement and fiduciary integrity, there may be a general reluctance on the part of the some qualified special educators to abandon established public school positions and venture into the uncharted waters of educational experiments embodied by charter schools. Thirteen of the sixteen school administrators involved in the study indicated that they had experienced difficulties in locating and hiring qualified professionals to fill the positions in their special education programs. This was particularly acute in those specialized related service areas such as speech and language therapists, and educational diagnosticians. In most instances, these services were provided by contractual arrangements with public school personnel or through private centers that offer these services. According to one administrator:

Speech therapists? Where can I find one? I have several students now that need therapy and we can't provide it because we can't find one to provide the service. If we contact the (public) schools to help, they just say that they are looking for speech therapists too! I have three or four kids right now that you cannot understand because their speech is poor, and I am at a loss as to what to do. It's sad.

Several administrators, who had similar problems in finding special educators, often resorted to extraordinary measures to address their needs. Typical responses included:

We had to have some of our "regular" educators go back to school to get certificated provisionally so that they could teach these students in their regular classes.

Another responded:

The (local) university had a program (in collaboration with the state department of education) where we could have student teachers in special education teach our special students with

supervision from a master teacher. It worked out well. They gained experience and we got a good, enthusiastic teacher at a really low cost.

Another administrator summed up the situation for many charter schools in need of special education professionals:

We canvassed the area teacher education programs, looking for those students that would graduate soon and would be willing to come to our school. We networked. We were competing for a limited commodity. We made do. We are still looking for people who know what they are doing and will be with us in the future. It is just hard attracting good quality people when they are in such demand all over.

#### *Resources.*

A third recurring theme that was heard from the respondents was that of a lack of resources, including physical space for classrooms, monies for programs and activities, and a general lack of available materials designed for special needs populations. These challenges are, by no means, unique to charter schools. However, when considering the relatively small numbers of students requiring special services in the schools under investigation, and hence, the reduced amount of federal and state funding that follows these students, it was no surprise that there would be shortages of available dollars for materials, equipment, and other necessities that are typically found in larger public special education programs. This is perhaps another reason why many of the charter schools studied have opted for a more "inclusionary" service delivery model. This arrangement allows for students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive of all environments (the regular classroom) and yet still have access to the requisite materials, activities, and curricula specified by their particular Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Charter school facilities, in many instances, are not what some may consider typical "school buildings." Many schools in this study were, indeed, spacious, well-appointed facilities that one would associate with a "school." In other instances, the school was essentially a "store front" that had been acquired and utilized until a larger, more traditional, facility could be obtained. In one instance, two charter schools, operated by the same for-profit charter school management company, occupied the same building. That facility was exceptionally well-appointed and would be considered palatial by school administrators in many sectors of the state.

A major concern for any charter school in its inception stages is that of selecting a site that is physically accessible to students and staff. When questioned about the availability of "pull-out programs" in her school, one administrator replied:

If I pull out this student (one who had physical disabilities) for services from a regular classroom, where do I pull her out to? There are no other classrooms on the ground floor, and that means we would have to go up (stairs). But there are no elevators. Pull-out is out of the question. We bring the services to the student in the regular classroom.

#### *Providing a Full Continuum of Services.*

Shortages of qualified staff and limited resources combine to make the provision of a full continuum of services a challenge to many of the charter schools in this study. Of particular concern was the provision of services for students who had been identified as "behaviorally disordered." Many of the participants stated that they could not find teachers certificated in this categorical area, and when they did locate them, those teachers were also responsible for children who had a variety of other disorders such as learning disabilities and mild mental retardation. Consequently, the participants were greatly concerned that they



were not adequately providing the kinds of services (ie. counseling, behavior supports) that many of these children needed. As one administrator described:

The kids that came to us from some of the public schools had behavior problems that were tremendous challenges. The parents had enrolled them, hoping that our school would be a more therapeutic environment than what they had been in, and we tried our best to meet their needs. In many cases we were successful, but in some...they need a self contained class to work on their social skills along with the academics. But we have to spread what we have around pretty thin, and that means that some of the (children's) needs may go unmet. That was the thing that was really unfortunate as we got this school going. We simply *have* [italics added] to do better in the future along these lines.

Another participant noted:

We have to contract for so many of the services that we are required to offer these students. It would be wonderful to have them (the service providers) here on the school grounds all of the time, but just go and try to find a speech therapist that you can afford. We have one or two students that need PT (physical therapy) as well, but we can't justify that expense of hiring a PT person for so few kids with our board, and so we do the next best thing; we contract out for that service.

#### Future Challenges

The final section of the study dealt with issues that the charter school administrators viewed as being particularly challenging in the near future. The participants were asked to respond to the statement, "Please describe any major concerns that you anticipate for your special education program over the next 5 years." It was not surprising that the respondents in the study identified challenges for the future that were very similar to the challenges that they encountered in establishing their programs initially. The three greatest challenges identified by the participants included: (a) finding adequate numbers of teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers for their programs; (b) having the ability to offer a broader continuum of service delivery options to their students; and (c) finding all of the requisite resources (funding, space, securing records, time for paperwork) to allow the schools to provide services to children with exceptional learning needs. Nearly 80% of the school administrators interviewed remarked that hiring qualified special education personnel was a continuing problem and they saw no reason to believe that this situation was going to ease in the foreseeable future. This is not a difficulty that is unique to the charter schools; many public schools across the nation cannot hire qualified people to fill these positions. And as the population of special needs children steadily increases, there will be an increasing need to supply schools, all schools, with teachers who are properly trained and have a willingness to work with children that pose considerable learning and behavior challenges.

A number of study participants noted that having the ability to provide a broader continuum of service delivery options would be a considerable challenge in the years ahead. Much of this difficulty arises because the charter schools often find themselves in a position where they must contract off campus for specialized services such as counseling, speech-language services, and physical/occupational therapies. That difficulty is actually two-fold. First, with small numbers of children in the charter schools who require these specialized services, hiring personnel to work exclusively with so few children becomes cost prohibitive. Second, there are simply not enough of these highly-trained professionals to fill the existing needs of all schools. Along these same lines is the awareness on the part of many charter school administrators that some children with greater learning needs will require more intense, individualized instruction that may not be obtainable by using only one service delivery option such as the inclusion

model. In order to provide a greater array of services to children, the charter schools will have to access the resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce, to address these concerns.

A need for greater resources was the third most often mentioned as being a concern over the next five years. Space is at a premium in many of the schools visited, and as the schools' enrollments increase, the need for teaching space will continue to be a problem. Many of the charter schools in this investigation rented space, and in some instances, they had to share space with other "schools" or building tenants. Space costs money, and that is another resource that many charter schools lack. For educating students with exceptional learning needs, they must rely on the traditional funding mechanisms (exceptional pupil aid and entitlements) that follow the students from the public school (domicile district) to the charter school. The administrators were keenly aware that the monies they receive from the public schools are inadequate now and the prospects for additional funding in the years to come are rather bleak.

## **DISCUSSION**

Since their inception, charter schools have become an increasingly prominent feature of America's educational landscape. Because they are so new, and because each is unique in its mission, they remain largely experimental. However, the challenges that have been experienced by charter schools as they attempt to educate children with exceptional learning needs are essentially the same as those faced by the public schools nationally. Teacher shortages, lack of time and resources, paperwork burdens, and other familiar themes were heard over and over again by the investigators during the course of the study. These are the same issues that have resounded in the special education literature for the past decade, and there appears to be neither abatement in the near future nor any immediate answers to these concerns. Many of the administrators involved in this study were clearly frustrated by federal and state requirements for the education of students with disabilities. In some instances, a clear lack of knowledge of the special education laws and operating procedures was readily apparent. These administrators were, in most instances, struggling with just getting the schools in an operational mode, and were largely concerned with providing a good education for the whole student population. In some instances it was as if providing for the needs of students with disabilities was an afterthought. However, the administrators, in every instance, were zealously committed to the success of their respective schools, their students, and to adhering to the missions of those schools.

Based upon the results of this investigation, a number of recommendations are suggested for charter school administrators who must comply with federal and state laws pertaining to the provision of education for students with disabilities. First, and foremost, it is recommended that charter school administrators, or those responsible for the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to children and youth with special needs, seek assistance from their sponsoring agencies, nearby colleges and universities with teacher education programs, state departments of education, and other resources that can offer expertise and guidance in the initial phases of special education service delivery. These sources can provide valuable information related to the provision of FAPE, legal compliance issues, handling paperwork and data collection, obtaining funding, working effectively with parents and advocacy groups, and securing qualified teachers and paraprofessionals.

Second, in order to avoid many of the "start-up" difficulties experienced by those in the present study, the authors echo the admonitions of previous investigators (Blakemore, 1998; Lange, 1997) to: (a) consider as early as possible in the charter school's planning stages the current or potential needs of special education students (ie. physical access, related services personnel, behavioral intervention plans); (b) have in place an efficient method of student referral for unidentified, yet potentially eligible, students at risk for disabilities; and (c) work closely with special education professionals from "feeder schools" to obtain current Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and other pertinent records of incoming students in order to be prepared to initiate appropriate services to students without delay.

Finally, charter schools, just as their traditional public school counterparts, should have in each building sufficient numbers of “qualified” special education professionals who have been trained in meeting the needs of children and youth with exceptional learning and behavior challenges. There has been a recent effort in Missouri, and in other areas of the nation, to address the significant shortage of teachers in several “critical areas” of public education. Among these efforts include programs that allow persons with any undergraduate degree (ie. mortuary science, electrical engineering, aviation) to be placed on a fast track to become teachers in public schools. Under these fast track plans, school districts can employ persons who desire to be teachers if they agree to certain conditions. Common among these conditions for temporary certification include earning a number of college hours for state certification in a selected area of training (including special education), being supervised by a college clinical supervision professional, and completing additional requirements (ie. portfolios, assessments such as PRAXIS) as specified by the particular state teacher certification authority. Some states’ charter schools legislation allows for certain percentages of “non-certificated personnel” to be employed as teachers in those charter schools. It has been our experience that children with extraordinary learning and behavior problems are the ones that are the *most* in need of capable, qualified, certificated professionals who are well grounded in the legal and pedagogical nuances of meeting these children’s unique learning needs. While we recognize the acute shortage of special education professionals in all public, private and alternative settings where special needs children are educated, it is imperative that these children’s unique educational needs are placed above all other considerations. Providing unqualified, untrained, and ill-prepared instructors for special needs children is ill-conceived, imprudent, and perhaps illegal.

Charter schools remain largely experiments in American education. They will in all likelihood remain so until they can show that they are both accountable to state and federal mandates to serve the needs of all children in environments that are conducive to learning and abide by their missions of innovation and true alternatives to traditional public schools. Continued investigation into the operation of these schools appears warranted, particularly in light of new federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

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