



## **SPECIAL EDUCATION AT CLASSICAL CHARTER SCHOOLS**

### **Introduction**

Charter schools face challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities to provide special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). At charter schools, the practical difficulty of providing students with disabilities (SWD) with a quality education has tended to limit discussion to the number of such students served by the school, rather than the students' academic performance. This, of course, runs contrary to the results- and performance-oriented focus that most charter schools espouse.

Clearly, evaluation of a school's success must be based on the success of its entire student body, including both general and special education students. At Classical Charter Schools, we look closely at the performance of our scholars with disabilities beyond just the proportion of special-to-general or the absolute number of SWD that we serve. We have put in place numerous techniques and strategies to boost the performance and academic growth of this cohort.

### **Importance of English Language Proficiency**

Classical's priority is to ensure that all our scholars reach proficiency in reading, writing and speaking English. This includes high-need, English language learners (ELL) and scholars with disabilities. We believe all scholars, regardless of demographics, language, or disability, can achieve at high levels through a highly structured, disciplined environment in which expectations are clear and supports are ample.

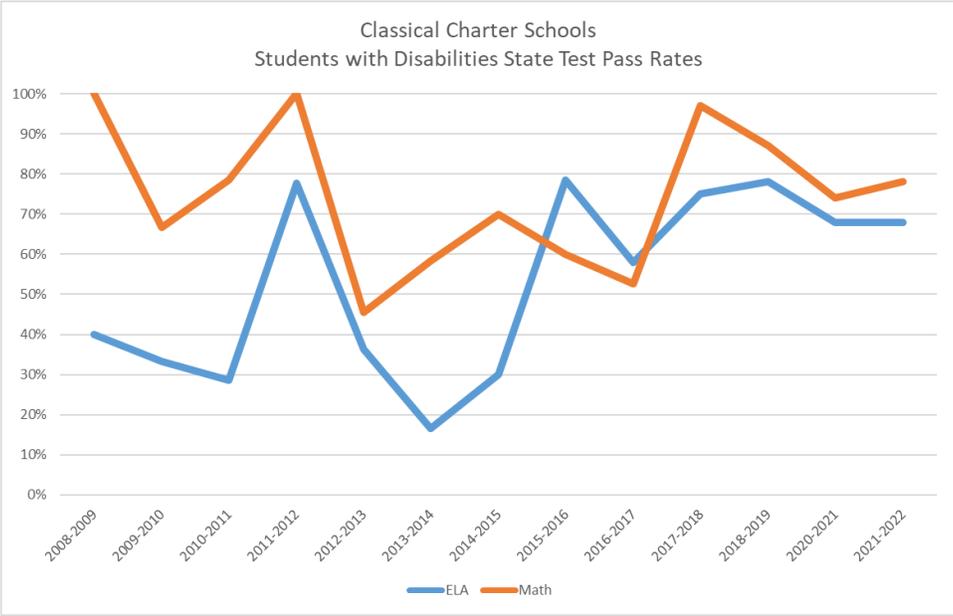
Developing a strong proficiency in English as soon as possible enables high-need scholars to reach the school's established academic goals for all scholars. Therefore, we utilize structured immersion (English-only instruction) to improve proficiency. The classroom teacher provides individualized, structured, and sequential lessons in English, and SWD remain in the general education classroom with their peers during the school day. Teachers in structured immersion settings are provided with professional development tools to aid in improving scholars' comprehension and fluency. These include clarity of speech training, classroom noise control, use of native language when appropriate, maintaining positive outlook, setting academic goals, use of visual aids, remedial assistance, and planning toward total "mainstreaming" or declassification. Based on substantive research, and with our scholars' needs and goals in mind, structured immersion is a proven approach to achieving measurable academic success among ELL and SWD.

### **Evaluating SWD Success**

Overall, we have a proven, and exceptional, academic achievement track record. In 2014, South Bronx Classical I won the National Blue-Ribbon Award and was designated a "Reward" school by the NYS Education Department.

In the years to follow, South Bronx Classical I would receive this honor again (in 2020) and South Bronx Classical II and III would be named National Blue-Ribbon Award recipients in 2019 and 2022, respectively.

By isolating our SWD’s test scores, our commitment to providing this cohort with an education equal to that of general education scholars is apparent.



**Reading Level Attainment**

One of Classical’s specific goals for our scholars is to ensure that every scholar develops proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking in English. This goal does not change for scholars with disabilities; in fact, it may be more important for our SWD to develop this proficiency quickly, as academic growth in future grades requires mastery of English. We evaluate our scholars’ reading comprehension at least seven times each year using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. These assessments require scholars to independently read, analyze, and make predictions about short texts. Each scholar is assigned a reading level from AA-Z based on the test results. Each letter also corresponds to a numerical grade equivalent: AA is equivalent to a pre-school reading level of - 0.25 years of school, while Z corresponds to seven years of school. Each grade has a designated target reading level for the end of the year.

Grade	Kindergarten	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
Reading Level Goal	E	K	N	Q	T	W	Z

A scholar’s total growth during the school year is the difference between the scholar’s end of year (June) and start of year (previous August) reading levels. In the 2021-2022 academic year, our general education scholars achieved 1.3 years of reading growth, and our scholars with disabilities were not far off, achieving 1.2 years of growth.

Much of the success of our SWD is a result of a commitment to bring high-need scholars to a high-performing level. At CCS, our teachers work exceptionally hard with small groups of scholars, divided by reading level, to ensure that every scholar gets individualized attention. Over the course of the school year, this small group approach allows a teacher to learn each scholar's individual strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can then target for improvement during the small group sessions.

### **Summer Learning Loss**

One more basis of comparison with which we can assess scholars with disabilities is the magnitude of their summer learning loss ("summer slide") compared with that of general education scholars. This loss is calculated using Fountas & Pinnell reading levels from the end of the school year, in June, and the first assessment of the next school year, the following August. The difference between these two reading level values quantifies the amount of learning each scholar has lost over the summer. Impressively, both cohorts maintained over a year's growth moving from the 2021-2022 school year into the next.

Our most recent data (2021-2022 to 2022-2023) reveals that SWD at Classical experienced "summer slide" in reading that is only 0.02 more than the general education population at our schools. This small difference speaks to the tailored lesson plans that our SWD receive to build their academic skillset, and it shows that the staff and teachers at CCS are delivering on the promise to ensure that our SWD do not fall behind their peers.

### **Scholar Support Services**

CCS provides Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) through a Special Education Coordinator. The Special Education Coordinator works exclusively with scholars with disabilities and provides additional push-in and pull-out services to these scholars per their Individual Educational Plan ("IEP"). Some SWD receive additional related services per their IEP, for example: counseling, speech, physical or occupational therapy. (CCS also offers these services to scholars who do not have an IEP but are projected to benefit from this extra support.)