

# 10 Education Innovations From the Charter Community

HOW LESSONS FROM CHARTERS IMPROVE CLASSROOMS FOR ALL





The Illinois Network of Charter Schools advocates for the improvement of public education by leveraging the charter school model as a catalyst to transform lives and communities. As the voice of Illinois charter schools, INCS engages a diverse coalition of policymakers, school leaders, parents, and community members to create systemic change and secure high-quality schools for underserved communities.



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**The first charter public school in Chicago opened in 1998.** From the very beginning, charter public schools recognized that students with academic needs would require more instructional time to catch up. As a result, charter public schools implemented longer instructional days so that students have access to additional instructional opportunities.

Many years later in 2011, Chicago Public Schools had one of the shortest high school days in the country. This minimal instructional time was correlating with low performance, graduation rates, and other negative outcomes for students. In response, Mayor Rahm Emanuel extended the day by 52 minutes for elementary schools and 46 minutes for high schools, providing students with more class time and better outcomes.

This is one example of how charter innovation has led to policy and programmatic changes within the Chicago Public Schools. But it is not the only one. This issue brief highlights 10 innovations pioneered in Chicago charter public schools that have now been adopted by the district more broadly.

Charter schools are free, independent neighborhood public schools open to all children, including students who are English language learners and students with special needs. Charter schools do not have special entrance requirements and have the freedom to be innovative, while being held accountable for advancing student achievement.

Charter public schools continue to excel in nearly every metric of academic achievement and student outcomes, largely due to their freedom to operate outside of district and state bureaucracy, allowing them to prioritize student needs.

“We believe that designing by, with, and for teachers produces the most powerful results for students,” says Distinctive Schools CEO Scott Frauenheim. “Our model was built on this foundation and continues to evolve based on feedback and innovative strategies designed by educators to meet the needs of our students, especially as we learned more from them.”

These 10 innovations are just some of the ways that the charter school movement has revolutionized public education.

# Ten Innovations

## PIONEERED IN CHICAGO CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### 1 Longer School Days

Even after CPS lengthened the school day, most charter schools still have an hour longer day than their district-operated peers. This extra hour adds up quickly, giving charter school students more instructional time and opportunities for learning. This increase in instructional time is directly correlated with stronger academic achievement and outcomes for students.

#### Average hours in Chicago classroom each year



The average charter year is **5 days longer** than the average CTU year.

### 2 Longer School Years

On average, Illinois charter schools start their school year before district-operated schools. They also finish the year later. These additional school days are critical to ensure teachers have the flexibility and autonomy to fit all the necessary curriculum into each academic year, rather than cutting lessons or speeding through content at the end of the year.

A longer school year allows for more instructional time and as a result, stronger student performance and outcomes. This is especially beneficial at the high school level, where students need an array of core curriculum and extracurricular lessons to prepare for college entrance exams like the SAT. The additional school days at the start of the year also give students an advantage for Advanced Placement course exams since they can cover more material before the May exam period.

**TOP 10  
AVERAGE  
ACT  
SCORES**

*Open enrollment,  
non-selective  
Chicago high  
schools, 2016*

Rank	School	ACT
1	NN - UIC	22.1
2	NN -Pritzker	21.9
3	NN - Muchin	21.8
4	NN - Bulls	21.7
5	NN - Noble	21.2
6	NN - Rauner	20.9
7	Chicago Math & Science	20.8
8	Chicago Agriculture HS	20.1
9	Ogden HS	19.7
10	NN - Baker	19.6



### 3 College Fit

Charter public high schools like North Lawndale College Prep and the Noble Schools pioneered work in “college fit.” These schools utilize data to help match their students with colleges that have the best track records and programming to help low-income and first-generation college students. Charter schools that focus on college fit also offer additional financial support and scholarships to help make those colleges attainable for their students. Thanks to this additional prioritization of financial readiness, students aren’t just getting into colleges: they’re able to enroll and complete a post-secondary education with little to no debt.

College fit drives success beyond the walls of the classroom and helps students to succeed after graduation. **It’s one of the reasons that charter graduates are 1.48 times more likely to complete a minimum of four semesters of college compared to graduates from district-operated schools.**

#### CASE STUDY: NORTH LAWNDALE COLLEGE PREP

North Lawndale College Prep has a secret weapon for prioritizing college fit: the Phoenix Pact. The Phoenix Pact connects the school’s college-ready graduates with colleges that have track records of graduating students of all backgrounds, particularly African American students. Through the Phoenix Pact, students can get to know and apply to schools where they can guarantee a better shot at success and graduation.

Phoenix Pact secures grants and other financial aid to ensure that students’ loan debt is kept to a manageable level. On average, the Pact is able to leverage \$20k per student. For any remaining financial aid gaps, the Pact awards scholarships that can be used for necessities such as books,

transportation, and emergency expenses to make sure fiscal roadblocks don’t get in the way of success.

Available to students who graduate with a cumulative weighted GPA of 3.0, Phoenix Pact scholarships also support students throughout their college journey. Individualized counseling is available to help scholars stay focused on their goals and put setbacks into perspective. The Pact also connects students to a supportive peer network, school-year employment, summer programs, and after-college career assistance.

2 campuses

9-12 grades served

750 students

# 4

## Growth Data

Charter public schools were the first to utilize growth data as a powerful tool to assess the gains of their students and quantify the effectiveness of their schools' programming and instruction. This allows charters to optimize their learning models and improve upon what's working while identifying and modifying what isn't. Chicago Public Schools later adopted this practice after seeing its positive impact on charter schools.

By measuring growth and effectiveness, charter schools can adapt their educational models to best match student needs and replicate what's working well in classrooms. All members of school communities benefit from this. Students can learn in a way that works best for them; teachers see higher rates of success when using methods that their classes thrive in; and parents and families see positive outcomes for students that will put them on track for success in adulthood.

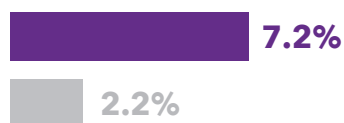
# 5

## College Persistence and Completion

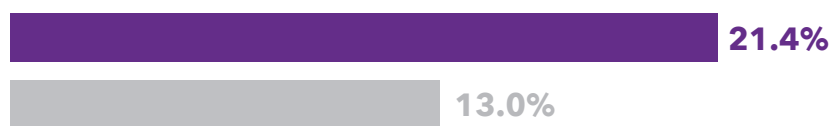
Charter schools have made college a central theme for students of all ages and have moved beyond mere college enrollment to focus on college persistence and completion. From classrooms named after the teachers' alma maters to class trips to college campuses and intensive college counseling, college is positioned as an opportunity for all students, not just a dream for the fortunate few. Many schools and networks also continue to support students after they have graduated with alumni wraparound supports that ensure success and graduation in the next chapter of their education journey. This additional support is a game changer for first-generation college students to go to and through college.

This work has a measurable outcome: Several charter schools not only boast 100% college acceptance rates, but charter public schools often send a higher proportion of their graduating classes to college than their district-operated peers. Additionally, charter school graduates are also statistically more likely to complete college coursework and graduate with their bachelor's degree.

### College and university enrollment rates



### Completion of at least four semesters of college coursework



● Charter ● District-operated schools

*University of Chicago Consortium on School Research: Chicago's Charter High Schools Organizational Features, Enrollment, School Transfers, and Student Performance*



## CASE STUDY: NOBLE SCHOOLS

At Noble Schools, college readiness and a choice-filled life is the end goal from the day students set foot in the classroom. Noble's Chief College Officer Aidé Acosta notes that educators are "creating a college-going culture at Noble" for all students. During their senior year, students participate in a college seminar class where students apply to a minimum of three colleges. The seminar and college counselors help students through every step of the process. This also includes college readiness lessons to ensure students are prepared for the rigor of undergraduate courses.

Since 2003, Noble Schools have also facilitated their Summer of a Lifetime program. The program provides funding and exposure to support hundreds of high-achieving, low-income students from across Noble Schools to participate in summer academic enrichment programs at colleges and universities nationwide. This

opportunity further inspires students to complete their degrees: Between 2003 and 2015, Summer of a Lifetime graduates were 2.5 times more likely to earn a Bachelor's degree than comparable Chicago Public Schools graduates.

Even after graduation, Noble alumni continue to receive support from specialized college counselors. The transition from high school to college can be a challenging one academically and socially for many students, and these counselors are a resource for the first four semesters of students' college careers. Once students reach their fifth semester, the statistical probability of their graduating is significantly higher than when they begin college.

18 campuses

9-12 grades served

12,700 students

## 6 Implementation of Student-Based Budgeting

Student-based budgeting is the system that assigns funding to schools based on enrollment totals, meaning that education funds "follow" a student to their school, whether that be a districted-operated school or a charter public school. Each year, a per-pupil rate is determined to adjust for inflation, teacher salary changes, and other costs.

In Illinois, charter schools have always received funding based on enrollment using this student-based budget model. It has since been implemented by Chicago Public Schools for their district-operated campuses because this system ensures equitable spending per student and gives schools more autonomy over the budgeting process to make decisions at the school level and closest to students and their needs.

## 7 Measuring School Climate

Charter schools use a data-informed approach to shaping school culture: the 5Essentials survey. 5Essentials is an evidence-based system designed to drive improvement in schools by providing actionable reports based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents. The survey examines five indicators that positively affect school success: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction.

Charter schools were among the first to implement these surveys in Illinois, and they've given these schools a clear path forward to make improvements to the school environment for all members of the school community. The practice is now used by the Illinois State Board of Education, guiding districts as they make ongoing improvements to schools that best offer students an excellent education.

### CASE STUDY: : BETTY SHABAZZ INTERNATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL

One of the oldest charter schools in the state, Betty Shabazz International Charter School is a network of two African-centered K-8 charter schools. BSICS is focused on helping students to have a strong sense of cultural identity and a commitment to make positive contributions to the community and the world.

BSICS strives for the best possible school culture, adapting clear Anti-Bullying and Wellness policies that keep students physically and mentally well. The network also has an active Parent Council, giving families the opportunities for engagement that characterize many charter schools and

promote a well-rounded learning environment.

With the help of the 5Essentials survey, BSICS is able to see the impact that its school environments have on students and staff alike. Since 2019, the school has consistently increased its scores for supportive environment and ambitious instruction metrics, with growth across the other three categories as well.

1 campus

K-8 grades served

398 students

## 8 Dual Language Programs

Dual-language programs provide classroom instruction in both English and a secondary language. Rather than making a language course its own class, the language component is incorporated into the curriculum. While charter schools aren't the first to implement such a program, they are among the first in the state to implement it using their autonomy and flexibility to fit school models to students' needs and helped to popularize the concept across the education landscape.

Not only do these programs give opportunities to English language learners, but they also allow native English speakers to learn another language in an integrated setting. This setting allows for smoother onboarding of a new language while students are actively learning other content, making it a key component of their educational journey.

### CASE STUDY: ERIE ELEMENTARY CHARTER SCHOOL

Erie Elementary Charter School was one of the first schools in Chicago to implement a dual-language program, and has been doing so for 18 years. At this K-8 campus, students attend classes in both Spanish and English, allowing for the mastery of both languages by the time they enter high school. In addition to learning the Spanish language, the school also makes a conscious effort to celebrate different Latin American cultures. "We recognize there are different dialects, and there's no right or wrong way to speak Spanish," says Carlos Perez, Erie's Executive Director.

By the time they graduate from eighth grade, 77% of Erie students will earn the State Seal of Biliteracy Award, compared to the district attainment rate of 50%. The results demonstrate the impact that dual-

language and culturally competent education can have on learners, even early in their educational journeys.

The benefits of dual-language programs extend beyond academic environments. Perez notes some families choose Erie "so that their children are able to talk with their grandparents in their native language even better than their parents can." English language learners also benefit by being able to stay in their core classroom for lessons without being pulled away for specialized instruction and missing out on key social and emotional learning with their peers.

1 campus

K-8 grades served

398 students



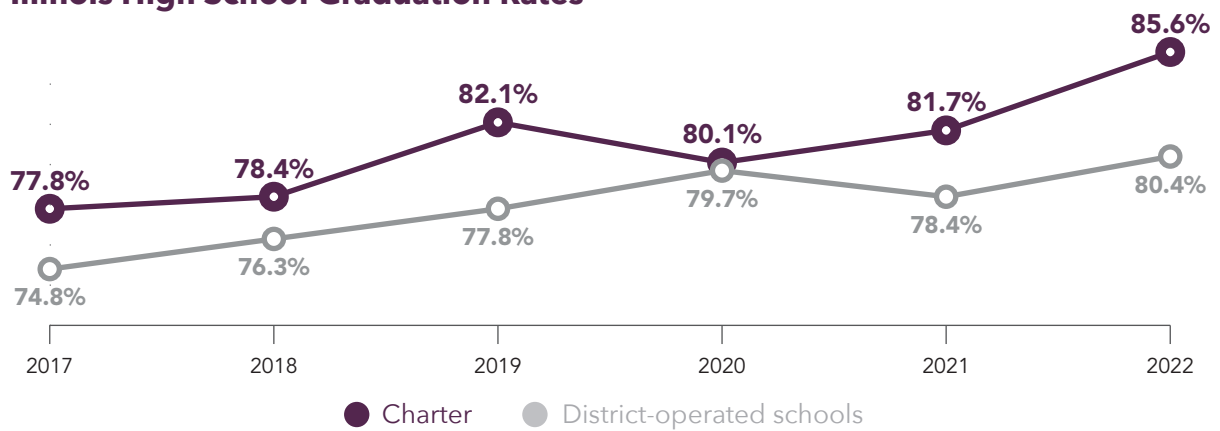


## 9 Using “Freshmen on Track” to Measure Student Success

Freshmen on Track allows schools to look at students’ GPAs and attendance rates from their freshmen year of high school and compare them to graduation rates their senior year. The results allow schools to use previous data to target and support struggling students early on, based on prior graduating classes and alumni performance.

Charter high schools were among the first in the state to proactively use this data in a way that improved student performance and outcomes. Charters have consistently higher graduation rates than district-operated schools, and using “Freshmen on Track” is a major component of this.

### Illinois High School Graduation Rates



## 10 Single Gender Support in Schools

Charters have a long track record of providing same-gender support for students. Historically, single-gender charter schools have catered to either girls or boys and their specific educational needs. These environments removed the pressures and distractions that gender can play in an educational environment, allowing students to focus on the curriculum.

More recently, charters are finding ways to provide same-gender spaces and role models for students without dividing students based on gender. At Noble Schools, single-gender advisories create the opportunity for students to form trusting relationships with other students and adults of their gender. This model also allows transgender or non-binary students to have the benefits of same-gender environments without disrupting their education or putting them in an uncomfortable position at their current school.

# Conclusion

Since the first charter public school opened in Illinois, they have pushed the needle on academic achievement. They have served students and communities in need, thanks to unique learning models and a future-oriented approach to success. Because of the nature of charter public schools, educators have more freedom to adjust their curriculum and school environments in order to meet students where they are and help them to grow.

**The Illinois charter community urges lawmakers and policy officials to uphold the charter model by protecting the autonomy of 134 charter public schools across the state.** Not only are these schools serving more than 60,000 students from underserved communities, but they're also finding new ways to innovate. Equally important, they are sharing these lessons with other public schools so that all public school students can benefit. With each new idea or system that charter schools implement, test, and fine-tune, public schools are one step closer to finding what works for their own students and communities.

**60,853**

students in Illinois are enrolled in charter public schools

**55,521**

students in Chicago are enrolled in charter public schools

**134**

charter schools in Illinois

**119**

charter schools in Chicago



Of the Illinois charter school population:

**96.4%**

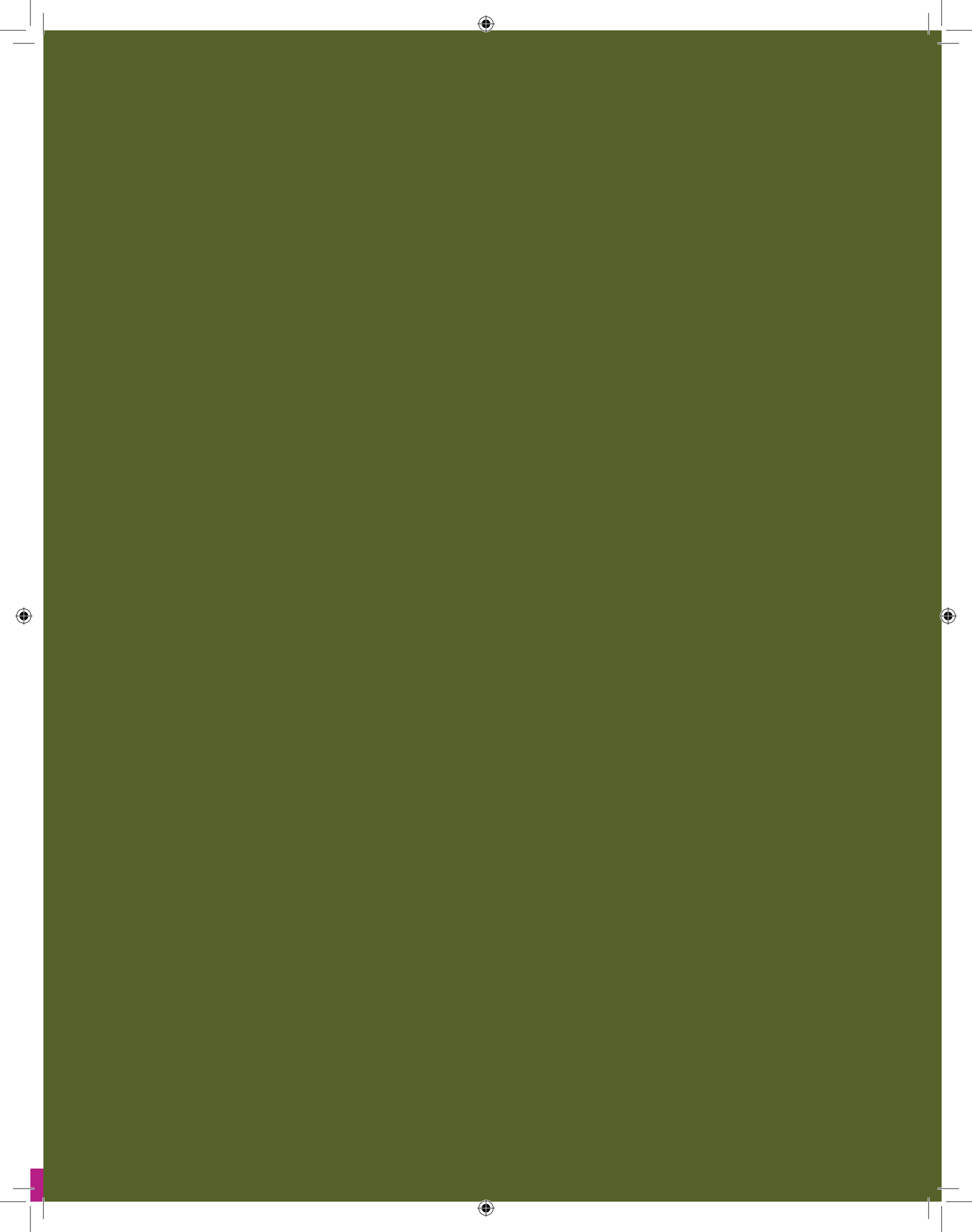
are students of color

**85%**

receive free or reduced lunch

**14%**

are enrolled in special education







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