

## **Bazelon Center Finds D.C. Charter Schools Discriminate against Children with Disabilities**

Washington, D.C. – May 12, 2011 – After a lengthy investigation, today the Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law filed a discrimination complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division against the District of Columbia. District charter schools routinely discriminate against students with disabilities, violating federal civil rights laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

The Bazelon Center found that D.C. charter schools often require parents to disclose detailed information that reveals a student’s disability, which the school then uses to screen out applicants with serious disabilities. Charter school officials frequently tell parents that the school cannot or will not meet a student’s special education needs, despite legal obligations to meet those needs. D.C. charters that do admit students with disabilities often then warehouse those students in restrictive and costly private schools at taxpayer expense.

“In this era of education reform, the Obama Administration, lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle, and major foundations champion charter schools as an important alternative to traditional schools,” said Robert Bernstein, Ph.D., executive director of the Bazelon Center. “Families want these options for their children. But unfortunately for D.C. families, many D.C. charter schools shirk their responsibilities to students with disabilities.”

As a result of the unlawful practices described in the Bazelon Center’s complaint, D.C. charter schools serve a disproportionately low number of students with disabilities. This trend is especially pronounced among students with the most significant disabilities, as those students are concentrated in just a few highly segregated charter schools. Among students receiving the most intensive special education services, 75 percent attend one of three charter schools that serve primarily students with disabilities.

“In virtually all cases children with disabilities can be -- and under the law should be -- educated with other children in a general education classroom,” said Lewis Bossing, senior staff attorney with the Bazelon Center. “Charter schools are supposed to give families more options for their children’s education, not shut them out entirely or needlessly segregate them from other students.”

Charter schools routinely ignore guidance issued by District oversight agencies, including the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the Public Charter School Board, on inclusive admissions practices and the integration of students with disabilities.

“The District has acknowledged publicly that the segregation of students with disabilities is a serious civil rights issue. It’s time for the District to live up to the law and ensure that all students have access to charter schools,” said Ira Burnim, legal director of the Bazelon Center.

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The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, [www.bazelon.org](http://www.bazelon.org), is the leading national legal-advocacy organization representing people with mental disabilities. It promotes laws and policies that can enable people with psychiatric or developmental disabilities to exercise their life choices and access the resources they need to participate fully in their communities.

Click [here](#) to read the complaint. For more information and to speak to a Bazelon Center expert on this issue, contact Dominic Holt, at [dominic @ bazelon.org](mailto:dominic@bazelon.org) or 202.467.5730, ext. 311.