

THE DISTRICT

Charter board to start investigating special education practices

By Rachel Baye
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D.C. charter schools' special education programs will be investigated if the schools appear to discriminate against students with disabilities, under a new policy announced Tuesday.

Eleven criteria can trigger an audit under the DC Public Charter School Board's new policy, including whether schools expel or suspend students with disabilities more frequently than other students, whether students with disabilities leave schools midyear more frequently than other students or whether students with disabilities make up at least 7 percent of enrollment.

The charter board initiated the change following a large number of questions about charter schools and their ability to serve students

with disabilities, said Naomi Deveaux, the board's deputy executive director.

The change is a necessary step, said Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center.

Though some schools provide strong programs for students with disabilities and shouldn't have to undergo audits, Sandalow said she has heard more negative stories than positive.

"There are schools that subtly and not so subtly turn kids away who have disabilities," she said. "A parent will ask about a school, and they will say, 'Now, I don't think we're well-equipped to help your child. ... What they are saying is, 'We aren't willing to accommodate your disability,' which is a very clear violation of the law."

Legally, charter schools, like all public schools, are required to give

Examples of criteria that can trigger an audit

- » Less than 7 percent of enrolled students in K-12 programs have an Individualized Education Program.
- » Students with disabilities are suspended or expelled at a higher rate than students without disabilities.
- » Students with disabilities withdraw from or transfer out of a school midyear more frequently than students without disabilities.
- » A disproportionate number — 75 percent — of students with disabilities at a school have a single type of disability classification.
- » The Office of the State Superintendent of Education finds the school is out of compliance with rules like whether a hearing is held before a student is suspended.

a student with any type of disability the services necessary to make sure he or she gets the same quality education as a student without a disability, Sandalow explained. That means a school needs to provide a student with speech therapy for a language-based learning disability if that is what the

student needs.

Deveaux said the charter board has not identified any specific problem areas or schools to be audited.

However, charter schools have come under fire recently for dis-

cipline policies that cause a large number of students to be suspended or expelled. Students with disabilities are not exempt from these policies.

Data the board submitted to the D.C. Council show some schools have suspended large numbers of students with disabilities. For example, Maya Angelou Public Charter School's Evans Campus suspended 29 students with disabilities in the first half of this school year. Friendship Public Charter School's Technology Preparatory Academy suspended 31 students with disabilities in the same period.

The charter board could not provide data showing what portion of students with disabilities these numbers represent.

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