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D.C. charter school under scrutiny for lack of special-ed students

By [Bill Turque](#), Published: February 2

A Northwest Washington public charter school that has not enrolled a special education student in three years is under scrutiny by District officials.

[Roots Public Charter School](#), which serves 120 children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, said it does not discriminate against students with physical or emotional disabilities. But the staff of the [D.C. Public Charter School Board](#), which oversees the city's 57 publicly funded, independently operated schools, says in a recent report that it has "grave concerns" about admissions practices at Roots. It said the board planned "an intensive compliance review" of the school.

Federal law requires that all public schools provide "a free and appropriate" education to students with disabilities. Charter schools, which are open to all families citywide on a first-come, first-served basis, are prohibited from inquiring about a prospective student's special education status. About 10 percent of the city's 29,366 charter school students were eligible to receive special education services in the 2010-11 school year, according to [enrollment data](#). Roughly 13 percent of students in traditional D.C. public schools are in special education.

The inquiry into Roots comes as charter school treatment of special-needs students has been called into question in the District and across the country. [The Southern Poverty Law Center](#) is suing the Louisiana Department of Education on behalf of thousands of disabled New Orleans students. Last year, the Bazelon Center, a nonprofit legal advocacy group, [filed a complaint](#) with the Justice Department claiming that some of the District's charters openly discourage parents from enrolling disabled children, especially those with significant needs.

Traditional D.C. public schools serve the vast majority of "Level 4" students — those with the most profound emotional or physical disabilities. Most Level 4 charter students are concentrated at two schools, [St. Coletta](#) and [Options](#). The Justice Department is gathering information about the complaint, which did not name Roots or other individual schools.

Roots, tucked into a converted garage in the Lamond-Riggs neighborhood, opened in 1999 built around [Nguzo Saba](#), the seven principles of African heritage: unity, self-determination, collective work and

responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Part of its mission is to “prepare students to break the chains of psychological conditioning that attempt to keep them powerless in all phases of society,” its Web site says.

School ranks in middle tier

Class sizes are small, with a 1-to-10 teacher-student ratio. About 60 percent of Roots students read at proficient or advanced levels on the 2011 DC CAS.

The charter board’s new performance rating system places the school in “Tier 2,” the middle of its three tiers.

School officials said they have served special education students over the years, but just not in the past three.

Parents wary of labeling

Founder and Principal Bernida Thompson said the school often draws parents who don’t want their children labeled as needing special services.

“A lot of parents who go here feel that too many black children are labeled special-ed and that this is a conspiracy against black children, and they don’t want that,” Thompson said. “Ours is an African-centered school. They learn about their heritage, and it gives them power and strength.”

Roots officials also said the school’s open design, with no walls separating classrooms, makes it less attractive to parents of children who have attention-deficit issues or require time away from their classes to receive special services.

Charter board members said they are not accusing Roots of wrongdoing but that the unusual absence of special education students merits investigation. “It does seem odd that any of our schools would have no students with disabilities enrolled,” board member Darren Woodruff said.

Board members also said that they could not account for why Roots was able to go for three years without a special education student before questions were asked.

“We weren’t on top of it,” Vice Chairman John “Skip” McKoy said. “And [the school officials] weren’t on top of it.”

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