



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

| 1110 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 900 | Washington, DC 20005 | T: 202.657.0670 | F: 202.657.0671 | www.firstfocus.net |

May 20, 2014

Catherine Lhamon
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, D.C.

Re: Civil Rights Guidance Letter to Charter School Operators

Dear Assistant Secretary Lhamon:

I'm writing on behalf of First Focus, a national bipartisan children's advocacy organization working to make children and their families a priority in policy and budget decisions, to thank you for sending a letter to charter school operators regarding the applicability of federal civil rights laws. As an organization that works on all policy issues that affect children, we understand the unique challenges that certain populations of children face and appreciate your effort at ensuring all children have access to great public schools.

Recent reports have revealed that some charter schools are not adhering to federal civil rights law. For example, some do not provide adequate educational services for children with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs). Further, some charter school admission policies preclude certain children from entering some charter schools with practices such as requiring a social security number or only offering admission materials in only English. As you note in your letter, because charter schools have choice-based admissions it is especially important that they are careful and work actively to not exclude students based on race, color, national origin, native language, or disability status. And the recent Civil Rights Data Collection revealed striking racial disparities in the impact of school discipline policies, an issue that can be worse in charter schools. This is even more important because preliminary evidence suggests that charter schools are often in areas with a higher proportion of students of color, ELLs, and students with disabilities than other communities. Your recent letter is an important proactive step toward holding charter schools accountable to federal civil rights law.

We look forward to working with you to ensure every child has access to high-quality public education. If you have questions or comments please contact Kevin Lindsey, Senior Director of Education Policy, at KevinL@firstfocus.net.

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley
President