

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council

Committee on Education

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of Public Schools in the District of Columbia

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Good morning, Chairman Grosso and Education Committee members. My name is Joyanna Smith and I am the Ombudsman for Public Education.

The Office of the Ombudsman was originally established by the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (“PERAA”). As the PERAA report describes, the Ombudsman’s office was designed to serve two primary functions: first, as a new avenue for parents to seek information and lodge complaints, and second, as a way to provide greater transparency and accountability for public education in DC. My testimony today will focus on describing how the office fulfills those two key functions. I will also comment on several of the report’s recommendations.

### **Avenue to seek information and lodge complaints**

The first and most important goal of the Ombudsman’s office is to help parents solve problems their students are facing in areas including special education, school discipline, bullying, academic progress, and enrollment. The importance of this role is demonstrated by the more than 500 requests for assistance that we have received in school year 2014-2015. We have more than tripled our case load from our first year of operation in school year 2013-14 to this current school year and we have only been open since February 2014. In our individual work with families, our goal

is to help parents and guardians improve their children's educational opportunities and outcomes.

In this work, our office plays a number of different roles depending on a family's needs. In nearly every case, we bridge the communication gap between families and schools in order to resolve disputes. We focus on strengthening relationships between parents and schools to the greatest extent possible. We also advocate for consumer access to a fair process and outcomes. When appropriate, we offer formal and informal mediation. Finally, we serve as an informational resource to help parents navigate the public education system.

### **Advocate for transparency and accountability**

We envision an educational system where all parents, families, educators and students are fully engaged in the public school systems and are empowered to make informed decisions about students in the effort to improve student achievement. Accordingly, we focus more on cultivating positive relationships between parents and schools than on holding educational entities "accountable." We do find that one key element to a positive working relationship between parents and schools is transparency. Parents are much more able to engage productively with schools that share information with them, including information about their policies, practices, and systems.

Our role is unique in that we are able to receive complaints from DCPS and public charter school families in one single office. This uniquely enables us to analyze city-wide complaint patterns. In addition to the important work that is already being done by other offices the city, we are able to provide an additional and independent mechanism to monitor some of the challenges that parents, students, and families experience. We can then communicate those challenges in a public forum so that there is an opportunity to address these issues in a collaborative manner.

Moreover, from a systemic perspective, we are able to ourselves make data-informed recommendations for policy and practice changes that will improve the success rates of racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and students within the achievement gap. As we continue to amass more data from our work with families, we anticipate that we will be able to identify even more opportunities for systems improvement in the coming years.

### **Our role going forward**

The effectiveness of our office also depends upon our ability to continue to engage in larger education policy discussions. We are working within the D.C. State Board of Education to become more involved in their internal and external policy discussions and more importantly, we would like to work with other agencies such

as the Deputy Mayor for Education to be part of policy discussions around truancy, special education, school discipline, breakdowns in communication between families and schools, and other critical issues.

We also look forward to working closely with the new Office of the Student Advocate. With that office's creation within the State Board of Education, the State Board has a unique opportunity to train families, educators, and community based professionals on the public education system, conflict resolution and parent engagement. We anticipate partnering with the Chief Student Advocate to ensure that many of their trainings and resources are targeted at the needs our office has identified.

### **PERAA report recommendations**

I would like to briefly turn to some of the recommendations provided within the PERAA report. The recommendations for increased data sharing and for addressing the persistent achievement gap are fully in accord with our office's recommendations, as described in our 2014 annual report. The PERAA report calls for DC to create a platform to make available to parents and the community comprehensive data about the school system's performance, progress, programs, and policies. We strongly support this recommendation. In our 2014 Annual Report, we discussed the need for more transparency in data

sharing and recommended that DC build on the existing Equity reports to publicly report data annually on topics including the number of students suspended, the number of disciplinary incidents, reasons for out-of-school suspensions, and days of lost instruction and disaggregate that data by school level, race/ethnicity, gender, English learner status, and disability status. This data should be shared with the Office of the Ombudsman, other educational entities, and the public in real time. We recommended data sharing no more than three to four months from the end of the school year, although we would encourage data sharing to occur even more swiftly than the timeline mentioned in our report.

Ensuring that the public has access to readily available data would not only support the work of school-based administrators and the DCPS Central office and PCSB, but it would also enable other members of the education community, such as parents and families, to independently evaluate the available school data. While one role of data sharing will be to ensure some level of accountability for the school system, equipping parents and families with such data will also ensure meaningful and informed parent participation. It is our position that parents should be considered full and equal partners in a student's educational journey. By equipping parents with information such as school

data and helping them understand what the data actually means, this information also translates into shared accountability for student outcomes.

Moreover, school data should be presented in a format that parents are able to easily digest. Parents need to be able to access a repository of data in one central location. DC agencies do already produce some reports such as the PCSB Performance Reports and the Equity Reports which provide indicators of school quality; however, parents have to access these reports in various locations and consolidate relevant data themselves in order to obtain an accurate picture of their school's performance. Equipping parents and other community members with key school data in one centralized location would better empower parents to understand how their child's school is performing.

The PERAA Report also recommended strategies to address "serious and persistent disparities in learning opportunities and academic progress across student groups and wards." Some of those strategies included more effective collaboration among public agencies and with the private sector to encourage cross-sector problem solving for the city's schools; accessible, useful, and transparent data about D.C. public schools, including charters, that are tailored to the diverse groups with a stake in the system; and measures to strengthen public

trust in education in a diverse, highly mobile city. In our work, where we engage in regular problem solving on behalf of the District's school-age children, we find that cross-sector problem solving is critical to improving public school education in D.C. In our own work, we continually strive to build strong relationships with education stakeholders and community professionals in order to ensure that there is a more coordinated approach to serving underserved, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations. We wholeheartedly agree that better coordination between DC agencies and community organizations serving DC's youth will serve to improve outcomes for our youth.

### **Conclusion**

As the Ombudsman for Public Education, I believe strong collaboration between families and schools is essential to dramatically improving student achievement. Through our daily work, we have a unique opportunity to work with families and students and develop a better understanding of their needs. We are able to listen to families who have faced barriers in obtaining special education services for their children or a child who feels unsafe in school. Thanks to the reestablishment of the Ombudsman's office, families have a place to go to help them voice their concerns and advocate for their child's needs. In addition, public education stakeholders now have a resource for

early detection of new issues, a dedicated mechanism for tracking issues and outcomes, and a source of recommendations for systemic change to improve existing processes.

Parents, families, students, and educators can share their problems and concerns with our office by calling us at (202) 741-0886, emailing us at [ombudsman@dc.gov](mailto:ombudsman@dc.gov), or visiting the State Board of Education website located at [www.sboe.dc.gov/Ombudsman](http://www.sboe.dc.gov/Ombudsman).

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.