



202-741-4692 (phone) • [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov) (email) • <http://studentadvocate.dc.gov> (web)

**Committee on Education – FY 2016 Performance Oversight Hearing  
Wednesday, February 15, 2017  
Office Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate  
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education**

Good morning, Chairman Grosso and to all of the members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to serve in the role of the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia and lead the Office of the Student Advocate, which is an independent office housed within the DC State Board of Education.

As we all know, despite the best of intentions, the public education landscape in our city is extremely complex, and the very uniqueness of our education system is both an opportunity and a barrier for students and families. Navigating the public education system in DC can be daunting. Understanding how the public education system should work for our individual students and families can be complex. Within this system, the Office of the Student Advocate plays a unique role in the DC education landscape as the only governance structure that combines the access and influence of a government agency with the direct, grassroots outreach necessary to serve our families and communities. Our office serves “to make the [public] school system more accessible and to boost parent engagement...and access to resources.”

The mission of the Office of the Student Advocate is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. Our office aims to play a critical role in amplifying the voices of our students, families, and communities in the DC education landscape. As connectors, conveners, and collaborators, we ensure that students and families are informed, connected, and empowered to be their own

best advocates in public education and in all areas of our city.

Our community interactions, our seat on policy focused taskforces, and the Request for Assistance line, among other forums of dialogue and engagement indicate that students and families often feel discouraged by what they perceive to be the lack of support and clear guidance from agencies and offices. The lack of systematic coordination within the city makes it difficult for parents and other stakeholders to support each other towards the education of our city's children, resulting in duplication, inefficiency, and lack of clarity in meeting the needs of families. In our office, we work to fill this void by staying knowledgeable about the various policies and programs within our school systems, building relationships among individual leaders and groups, and connecting students and families with the resources they need. Through the variety of resources, toolkits, and guides that we have within our office, we see ourselves as a connecting point for information and resources that are otherwise difficult to navigate.

The work of our office focuses around four strategic goals:

**First**, to remove the power imbalance that exist and work to shift the balance of power in favor of students, families and communities by convening stakeholders at all levels around topics of community importance;

**Secondly**, to develop and support the knowledge base of students, parents, and community stakeholders;

**Third**, to ensure that family and community perspectives are included in all relevant public education conversations; and

**Lastly**, to mobilize community-level leadership, specifically parent and student leadership, in grassroots education advocacy.

In fiscal year 2016 we worked to meet these strategic goals in undertaking the following programs and initiatives:

## **Request for Assistance**

As required by our statute, our office operates a public education hotline, or the Request for Assistance (RFA) line. The RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to answer any public education related questions and inquiries. We consider our RFA line to be a “311 system” for public education through which we provide relevant resources, information, and appropriate agency or organization referrals to meet the specific needs of the caller. In addition to resources and referrals, the RFA line allows our office to provide one-on-one coaching to families on a variety of public education issues. In fiscal year 2016 we did not have the staffing capacity to answer the line live but starting in school year 16-17 we began to answer the phone live. Since beginning that process we have already served more than 150 callers and we are on track to more than double the amount of callers that we were able to support in fiscal year 2016.

## **Education & Community Resource Guide**

In addition to our RFA line, our office also operates an online Education & Community Resource Guide. This guide is the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind and is a continuously evolving resource that currently has more than 400 resource listings organized into 33 category areas. The guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all 8 wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide was developed to highlight organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. This resource serves to acknowledge the work that is already being done by countless government agencies, offices, and community-based organizations while connecting families to those vital resources in one centralized location. In FY 17 we are continuing improve the usability of the guide and will re-launch a more user-friendly version of the guide in April 2017.

## **Special Education**

Student and families are faced with many issues in our city but one of the top issues continues to be special education. Approximately 15.6 percent of students have individual education

plans (IEPs) and receive special education services in DC. In addition to students with IEPs, 504 plans also provide supports and accommodations for students. One of the first calls we received on our RFA line was in regards to special education and that trend has continued for the almost two years that our office has been in existence. In FY 16 close to 20 percent of the RFA calls received dealt with issues of special education and needs for referrals and supports.

After reaching out to various stakeholders and organizations, we determined that our office should work to address this issue through information, resource sharing, and collaboration. Our office developed and implemented a “Know Your Rights” informational session on special education issues and tools for advocacy. Through collaborative relationships with the ward-based education councils (the Ward Five Council on Education and the Ward 4 Education Alliance) and partnership with the ward State Board of Education members, this series of informational sessions on special education rights were held in Wards 4, 5, and 8.

The goal of this series was to equip parents with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their child’s educational needs. Navigating the complexity of national and local laws that govern special education is overwhelming. This series worked to support families with vital tools and relevant information for their advocacy efforts on behalf of their child to:

1. Prompt an evaluation,
2. Understand the IEP and 504 processes,
3. Raise questions regarding special education services
4. Provide tools to support effective communication for engaging schools,
5. Understand the basic provisions of the law, and
6. Understand how to activate their rights.

A panel of experts, comprised of parents and education professionals, discussed the special education process in DC, with a focus on the 504 plan & IEP processes, how to overcome issues that might arise during the process, and focused on unpacking the nuances of federal and local special education laws. All of the panelists discussed their role in the various special education processes and ways that their office or organization supports students and families. This

discussion series was a collaborative effort that brought special education resources directly to families and supported the untangling of the various components of the law to make it more digestible. The discussion worked to provide families with proactive and reactive tools in order to advocate for their child and the services they need. This series provided resources to families that would allow them to be fully engaged in the special education process. Most importantly, this series brought a diverse group of traditional stakeholders directly to families in order to address their questions and concerns in a very accessible way.

Panelists included: Advocates for Justice & Education, Children’s Law Center, Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, OSSE’s Office of Dispute Resolution, DC Special Education Cooperative, OSSE’s State Advisory Panel on Special Education, Family Voices of Washington DC, DCPS Division of Health & Wellness and the Division of Specialized Instruction, and DC Prep.

From this series of discussions, our office also developed a host of online resource tools and support for families, educators, and community based service providers. In FY 2017, we have continued to share these resources and information with a host of organizations and providers that support students and their families. Schools have also asked for us to share this information with their families in an effort to educate them on their rights and processes. This work has also opened the door to opportunities for collaboration regarding behavior intervention and supports. We are currently in the process of working with the DC Special Education Cooperative, Advocates for Justice and Education, DC Public Charter School Board, and the Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program in this area.

### **Parent Empowerment**

Parent Advocacy and Empowerment Trainings – In FY16, our office focused on efforts to develop, implement, and facilitate a community specific parent empowerment series that worked to be responsive to shared concerns and issues elevated by parents in Ward 7. In partnership with the Ward 7 Education Council, SBOE President Karen Williams, DCPS, and DC Public Charter School Board, our office was able to launch the Ward 7 Parent Empowerment Summit Series. To date, over 80 Ward 7 parents and community stakeholders have participated

in four trainings. The trainings have focused on parent teacher organizational skill building, including but not limited to effective communication, mission and vision setting, and budget advocacy. In FY17, we are continuing to scale up this model to address the concerns and needs of parents in Wards 1, 5, and 8 – our work in those wards will be supported by Collaborative Solutions for Families, the Ward Five Council on Education, the Ward 8 Council on Education and the Far Southeast Family Collaborative. Our pilot series in Ward 7 will also continue to provide Ward 7 parents and community members with additional trainings and supports.

From our efforts we have developed a Parent Empowerment Resource Toolkit. Creating and establishing parent organizations are useful and effective ways to organize parent voices and amplify their power in the educational landscape. Effective advocacy involves identifying the purpose and objectives of the work in the communities, understanding the issues and opinions behind the causes, investing in the power of the advocates, and strategically leveraging available tools and skills to maximum utility. Because we know that one size does not fit all, our online Parent Empowerment Toolkit provides an outline of how to create and establish a parent organization with the right structure, leadership, and procedures for your school. This resource is a holistic guide that provides information and advocacy skills to parents and District residents who are interested in coalescing with other members of their school communities on how to improve their public education options. Our toolkit runs the gamut from explaining the importance of building relationships and partnerships through an established trust and fostering effective communication to connecting advocacy to action through goal/agenda setting.

### **Safe Passage**

The safe passage of our students continues to be a priority of our office. Each year, at various times of the year, the city works to be responsive to issues of safe passage for our students. Because of our work with families, we believe that our office is uniquely positioned to support our city's safe passage efforts by supporting the creation of more proactive and community driven solutions and approaches to this problem. In concert with the initiative for safe passage

in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, our office established the Safe Passage Community and Collaboration Working Group, which is comprised of government agencies, leaders of community-based organizations, and administrators of public education governance systems. As a working group, we navigate this issue by framing the definition of and context for safe passage to develop proactive solutions that are student, family, and community focused in ways that apply directly to the context of the District of Columbia and our very unique education landscape. The deliverables of our working group include:

- Cross-Jurisdictional Review of safe passage programmatic best practices and components. Analysis of Existing DC Safe Passage programs based on the “6 E’s” prescribed by the National Center for Safe Routes to School: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement, evaluations, and equity.
- Community surveying with the goal of capturing, sharing, and amplifying community voice regarding issues of safe passage. »
- School-facing survey on safe passage challenges, needed supports, and relevant contacts »
- Dialogue-centered community surveying in high-traffic areas. Questions include: (1) How do parents and students feel about safe routes? (2) What are the transportation or safety concerns? (3) How can they be communicated with schools, district leaders, elected officials, community organizations, and law enforcement?
- Safe Passage Resource Toolkit — to create and sustain the safe passage of our students and communities based on the “6 E’s” from National Safe Routes to School.
- Social media campaign supporting safe passage — to engage all community members in supporting our students and #DCSafeRoutes within our neighborhoods.

## **Student Discipline**

From the very inception of our office until today, issues and questions surrounding student discipline continue to be a top concern that students and families raise. Inquiries raised by families with our office regarding student discipline do not account for a large percentage of the calls that we received on our Request for Assistance line. But, what is most interesting about the low percentage of student discipline inquiries is the high correlation between questions regarding student discipline and other inquiry areas such as special education, student safety, or even issues of truancy. What we have learned through our communication with families is that students and parents lack clarity regarding the student discipline policies that govern our diversity of local education agencies and the schools they operate.

In an effort to support the needs of families and students in the area of student discipline, our office has partnered with Council for Court Excellence (CCE) to conduct a comparative analysis of student discipline policies for DCPS and each of the public charter LEAs. The initial purpose for this analysis was to support our understanding of the wide array of discipline policies and their varied nuances in order to support our work with families. What we quickly realized is that there was a void of resources for families in this area. Through the development of resource tools for families to support their school selection and transition processes, it is our hope to utilize our analysis to support families in their proactive and reactive needs surrounding school discipline policies. Such tools will allow parents and students to explore their school options in a more informed way. Currently, we continue to work closely with CCE on the development of these resource tools and DC specific student discipline best practices and recommendations for future consideration. What this process highlighted most was the absence of parent and student voice in the process of policy development – our work will continue to focus on the inclusion of parent and student voice in our student discipline policies and practices.

### **Trainings and Resource Supports**

In FY16, our office worked to develop several online materials and trainings to support the needs of students and families. These resources and trainings focused on the following topic areas:

- “Know Your Rights” resources and trainings to understand federal and local special education laws, resources, and supports
- Understanding the difference between Individual Education Plans (IEPs) v. 504 plans
- Effective Communication tools
- The Family/School Partnership: This resource focuses on how to build and nurture a relationship with your child’s school in a proactive way.
- Enrollment tools
- Understanding the DC public education governance structure: This resource helps to break down the system in a digestible way to support families’ understanding of the system, facilitate their ability to interact with the system, and foster families’ ability to engage in advocacy initiatives in support of the continuous improvement of our system of public education.

Additional resources launched in early FY17:

- Parent Empowerment Toolkit (already launched) – This resource can be found at <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/parent-empowerment-toolkit>.
- Following the Money: Public Budgeting 101 (partially launched)
- Behavior Intervention Supports (in progress) – The development of this initiative and resource supports is in partnership with several stakeholders.
- School-based trainings:
  - Building Trust and Effective Communications
  - Having Tough Community Conversations – offers a lens for consideration of issues of race and equity in the changing fabric and environments of our schools
  - Understanding the DC Public Education Landscape
  - Goal-Setting and Advocacy 101
- Student Discipline resource supports (in progress – in partnership with the Council for Court Excellence)
- Training for community-based organization and service providers who work with our most vulnerable families (i.e. family collaboratives, CSOSA, etc.).

Most of the resources that I have noted can be found on our website at [studentadvocate.dc.gov](http://studentadvocate.dc.gov). In FY17 our trainings and resource supports will continue to evolve and grow in order to meet the wide-array of needs that face students and their families.

### **Outreach Efforts**

Our ability to work within the community to address the needs of students, families, and communities is made possible through our outreach efforts, stakeholder engagement, and development of partnerships and coalitions. During the 2015-16 school year, our office had the opportunity to present and meet with numerous community groups, educators, parent groups, community-based organizations, and government stakeholders through our stakeholder listening tours. In our outreach efforts we touched each ward more than once – in many instances on several occasions.

In FY17, we have leveraged our relationships into partnerships and have pushed this office into the public education landscape as a trusted voice that is guided by parents and students. We currently sit on the Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force, the Truancy Taskforce, the School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group co-chaired by the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice and the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Steering Committee for Parent Leadership Training in partnership with Multicultural Community Service, the Behavior Intervention Working Group, DCPS Child Find panels, and the DCPS Community Action Team. These groups largely represent a cross-section of leaders from government agencies and community organizations, and we represent a valuable mix of both because of our unique placement as an agency with direct service to students, parents, and community members.

In addition to the engagement listed, our engagement with individual stakeholder is important to our office. We have built out our outreach efforts to ensure that we are reaching educators, families, and other education stakeholders in a variety of ways – through our online resources, in person presentations, community events, our newsletters and email blasts, and strategic placement and distribution of our office materials. Through these efforts we have touch close

to 2,000 individuals through our FY 17 outreach efforts and the numbers will continue to grow. Our outreach efforts have also sparked an increase in the number of callers to our RFA line and request for support from schools and service providers.

### **Language Access**

In FY16, our office did not have the funds to comply with the Language Access Act. We worked to move in the direction of compliance by translating portions of our website and our outreach brochure into Spanish. In addition to the translation of some materials into Spanish, we also have access to the Language Line service, which we utilize frequently to communicate with callers to our RFA line who do not speak English. This service has been valuable to our office. In FY16, our community outreach to communities who do not use English as a primary language has been possible through collaborative efforts with the Mayor's offices on various affairs (i.e. African Affairs, etc.) and community-based organizations that are trusted in those communities. Because of the strong relationships that we have nurture with various schools, we have been able to support non-English speaking families by the support of interpretation from bilingual staff members at some of the schools.

In FY 17, our office is continuing to move closer to compliance with the Language Access Act. We are currently in the process of translating our outreach materials and portions of our webpage into all of the required languages (i.e. Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Amharic, Chinese and Korean). Our office will continue to utilize the Language Line services to support the language needs of any caller to our RFA line. In FY17, we have continued to deepen our partnerships with community-based organizations and governmental entities to reach and engage with more non-English speaking students and parents. For example, our work with organizations that serve families from school communities with high counts of English language learners includes a partnership with Communities Solutions Collaborative in the Ward 1.

## **Needs Remain**

Fiscal year 17 has been more kind to our office on the financial resources front. In FY 17 we have more funds for programmatic development and implementation and our outreach efforts but needs still remain and the outlook for FY18 is rather bleak financially.

When families or individuals call our office, the Office of the Student Advocate, they are expecting that an office with a name like ours will be able to provide them with the very advocacy support that they need. We often receive calls where a parent is asking for an advocate for their child, or a service provider who is looking to connect a family with an education advocate. While we work very diligently to support families in the most comprehensive way that we can, we know that with our lack of staff capacity that we are not able to provide families with the individualized support that they need. Even when we are making organizational referrals for families we know that in many instances the organization that we are referring them to also does not have the capacity for individualized support as well. It is a challenge that keeps me up at night. Families are reaching out to us and I want our office to be able to support them fully. We have done some amazing work over the course of two years but as our office continues to gain recognition and the needs of families continue to persist, our office will require more staffing support to meet the need. We want families to know that when they call our office that we have the capacity to meet their needs – and our current staffing capacity of 2.5 FTEs is not enough capacity to serve our growing student population and their families.

On the technology front, our office is in need of a database system to track not only our RFA inquiries but also our outreach and programmatic needs. Since the very inception of our office until today, we have utilized Google Drive. Google Drive does not meet the needs of our office nor does it meet the security and confidentiality needs that our office requires. FY17 funds are allowing us to scale our programmatic functions but left no room for the development of a database to support our office's roles and functions.

## **Issues of Race and Equity**

Achievement gaps, disparities, and issues of race and equity continue to persist in our city and particularly in areas that most impact our students and their families. Even with the changing fabric of our communities, our schools continue to serve mostly black and brown students. In this work we have seen the great strides that we as a city, and as individual LEAs, are taking to face the issues at hand but in many ways the voices of students and families in the conversation or as the central focus of the solutions is lacking. Even with the best of intentions, some of our policy decisions continue to have an adverse impact on the very groups that we are hoping to support. Improvement can be incremental and the positive impacts touch some while others feel no relieve at all. Make no mistake of it – issues of race and class are still an problem in our city and from these issues a host of inequities are sustained.

Fiscal year 2016 was a year of discovery for our office. As we worked to establish our office in this crowded education landscape we have been able to engage in various conversations with families, educators, elected and government officials, and service providers. We have heard about the great work that is going on and the areas of void. Collaboration and breaking down silos are central to our work, and this focus makes it vital for us to partner with other agencies and organizations to support families in the way they deserve. In FY 17 our office has started to work within schools to support their work of breaking the cycle of race, class, and equity issues that exist. We have created a curriculum to support schools in having those tough conversations regarding difference with their school communities. Tough conversations make way for effective communication and the possibility of a shared path forward in a way that is specific to their school community. In addition to our work within schools, we are doing extensive outreach and relationship building with service providers that support students and families both inside and outside of the school building. Many of these service providers are working to combat the same persistent issues and I believe that our collaborative efforts will not only move the needle forward in this area but will also highlight other systemic issues that we can continue to bring to the attention of this committee as well as other decision makers and agencies in a effort to find policy solutions that are student and family centric.

## Conclusion

In closing, we believe that robust engagement in public education should be rooted in the “promise of bridging the gaps among parents, [educators], community groups, and [other] distinct constituencies.”<sup>1</sup> Working more closely with students and families in a comprehensive way to improve the outlook of our system of public schools is the perfect way to bridge the gap and engage students and parents in a truly authentic way. Their ability to navigate our public education landscape is dependent upon having policies that are student and family centered and also resources, such as our office, which can provide them with support.

Finally, as I close, if there is any person who is interested in contacting our office, they can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692 or emailing us at [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov). I thank you for this opportunity to testify and welcome any questions that you might have.

---

<sup>1</sup> Farkas, S., & Duffett, A. (2015). Maze of mistrust: Parents, educators, and the challenge of public engagement. *National Civic Review*, 104(1), 33-46.