

**Office of the Student Advocate  
2017-18 Annual Report  
Official Written Testimony: Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate**

**Opening**

Good evening, members of the Board and staff. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard, and I am honored to serve as Chief Student Advocate for Office of the Student Advocate. Today we publicly release our 2018 Annual Report, which details our work from the 2017-18 school year. Thank you for this opportunity to share our office's work for the past year and our current initiatives for SY 2018-19.

**Mission and Vision**

As you know, the Office of the Student Advocate provides guidance and resource supports for families to assist them in navigating our complex system of public education in the District of Columbia. In our day-to-day work, which I will detail in a bit, we support students and families in their advocacy through parent education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, and trainings. We do this work in order to equalize the balance of power between families and schools by increasing family voice, access, and power in our system of public education.

**How We Did It (Highlights of Work from SY17-18)**

For the past three years, our office has served as a centralized place to gain public education information and resources. However, we recognize that our office's position within the governance structure allows us to address day-to-day family and community concerns and provide systemic recommendations that align community and governmental goals. Before I highlight those a few of those recommendations, I would like to talk about the supports that we offer families and other residents wanting more information about public education in the District.

As you all know, we operate our Request for Assistance (RFA) line live Monday-Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. Our hotline supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members. We are able to provide information, resources, and referrals based

on the specific needs of the caller. In SY 17-18, we supported 425 callers through our RFA process.

In addition to our RFA line, we also provide a wealth of information and resources online that are accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These resource supports help parents and families better understand the public education system, policies, and procedures that impact them daily. I would like to specifically highlight our Parent & Family Go-To Guide. Last year, we shared with your our idea for ask sheets, intended to provide helpful conversation starters for families to feel informed in conversations with teachers and administrations. As that work grew, we decided to compile those single resources into a quick reference guide for parents and families. Our Parent & Family Go-To Guide now offers over 25 pages of information for the following topics:

- Public Education in DC
- Achievement/Testing
- Behavior
- Attendance
- Enrollment
- Special Education
- Additional Resources

This guide highlights our office's commitment to ensuring that all parents and families are able to navigate public education in the District.

Beyond our RFA line and online resources, we have expanded our workshops and trainings in order to meet the needs of schools, families, and service providers on a broad range of topics:

- Bullying Workshop- In SY 2017-18, our office launched our first bullying prevention workshop, in partnership with DC Office of Human Rights Citywide Bullying Prevention Program (OHR Bullying). This workshop was developed to provide clarity regarding local laws and definitions of bullying, to discuss bullying prevention practices, and to share accessible resources and supports for students and families. The workshop also served

- as a forum to facilitate more open conversations about bullying, including what bullying is and what the school's role is in ensuring student safety. This workshop in particular marked our first effort with offering live interpretation services for Spanish and Amharic-speaking families so English mastery would not be a barrier to access.
- Parent Leadership Series- In SY 2017-18 we rebranded our Parent Leadership Series (formerly named "Parent Empowerment Series") by continuing to focus our work on family partnership and deepening families' knowledge of the public education landscape. We expanded this work from Ward 7 to Ward 8 by hosting various conversations on how the public education system works, connecting knowledge to advocacy, DC government budgeting, and understanding how DC budget impacts schools. For this series we took a more disaggregated approach in an effort to reach more families in the places they already trust and are showing up. Our approach included hosting parent leadership sessions in partnership with a wider array of schools, community-based organizations, and service providers who work specifically in Wards 7 & 8.
  - Special Education Workshop Series- Launched in our first year of operation, our "Know Your Rights" workshop series was designed to support the needs of families who have students with special education needs. In SY 2017-18 we hosted our informational sessions on special education in Wards 1, 3, 6, and 8 in partnership with DC State Board of Education Representatives (Laura Wilson Phelan, Ward 1; Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3; Joe Weedon, Ward 6; and Markus Batchelor, Ward 8), DC Councilmembers (Councilmember Brianne Nadeau, Ward 1; Councilmember Charles Allen, Ward 6), and ward-based education organizations (Ward 3's Wilson Feeder Education Network and Capitol Hill Public Schools Parent Organization). Navigating and understanding how special education works in the District and within individual LEAs is essential in order for families to advocate on behalf of their student.

In addition to our trainings and events, I would also like to bring your attention to other work done in the 2017-18 school year:

- Our Parent & Student Advisory Committee provided an outlet for parents and students to assist the office in better serving families throughout DC. In this space, we were able to have conversations and discuss potential solutions to issues that impact education stakeholders. The committee was composed of DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter school parents and students, with representation from all 8 wards. During our bimonthly meetings, members were able to discuss systemic issues plaguing our education landscape. With feedback collected from their respective communities, committee members were able to have broader conversations about short and long-term goals for public education in the District.
- Over the last three years, our office has frequently mentioned the difficulties families experience as they transition from LEA to LEA due to the wide array of student discipline policies from one LEA to the next. This policy diversity has long highlighted a need for streamlined, cross-sector planning regarding student discipline. For SY 17-18, we partnered with Howard University School of Law students in the Fall 2017 School Discipline seminar as a part of the Education Rights Center (ERC) to analyze discipline policies from 57 LEAs in DC. The law students analyzed each handbook based on the following areas: Parents' Rights and Responsibilities, Clear Statements of Infractions and Penalties, Due Process and Appeals, Exclusionary Discipline and Its Alternatives, and Alternate Education Settings. The development of resource tools based on these findings are in progress and will be released in SY 2018-19. Families need to be supported in making enrollment decisions based on discipline policies before problems arise. In addition to awareness of an LEA's discipline processes and policies, students and families should also be invited for creation and evaluation of discipline policies, allowing the school community to work in conjunction to improve overall school climate.

### **Data and Other Work**

We would be unable to develop resources and trainings or host office-led events without the information gleaned from our Requests for Assistance line and community outreach. Our office's ability to be responsive and meet the needs of families relies on the assessment of the

state of public education gathered from our interactions with education stakeholders. I would like to take the time to highlight that data now.

*Outreach: A Three Year Comparison (see pg. 9)/*

*Requests for Assistance: A Three Year Comparison (see pg. 9)*

In SY 2017-18, we reached over 3300 individuals through our outreach and community engagement efforts. In addition to the increased volume of interactions with stakeholders, we were able to support over 400 callers through our Request for Assistance (RFA) line, which marks a 215% increase in calls since our first year of operation in 2015.

*SY17-18 Universe of Calls (see pg. 10)*

In SY 2017-18, we received 631 calls. During our operating hours, Monday-Friday from 9 am to 5 pm, we answered and addressed the needs of 425 callers through our RFA process. We receive over 200 calls outside of our operating hours. The number of calls made to our RFA line outside of our operating hours shows the great need families have regarding public education. When callers reach our office voicemail during non-operating hours, the voicemail message shares our website resources (accessible 24 hours a day) with the caller, provides the caller with our email address, and directs the caller to relevant resources. The voicemail message for our office is bilingual (in English and Spanish). Additionally, in SY 2017-18 all of our resource and website materials were translated into the six language access required languages in order to meet the needs of any person reaching out to our office.

*RFAs by Race (see pg. 11)*

In SY 2017-18, we added a race identity question to our RFA process. This question is optional, and callers are asked to self-identify. Those who declined to identify are not reflected in this data set. As we work to support equity, we need to assess how race affects public education issues and concerns. If we are to be honest and transparent about which families throughout the District need targeted supports and resources regarding public education, we have to consider racial identity when pushing for equitable outcomes for all students.

*RFAs by Sector (see pg. 11)*

Over half of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. The number of calls from DCPS families can be attributed to DCPS being the largest LEA in the District with 115 school locations. One-third of our RFAs came from students and families served by one of the District's 60+ charter LEAs. We have increased our outreach efforts to public charter families and school leaders and are continuing to identify ways to work more closely with charter schools and school leaders.

*Resolutions (see pg. 12)*

The majority of our resolutions involved connecting families to resources (both resources developed in-house and resources from other organizations available on our website) and providing information about their stated issue or need. Along with our resource guide and stakeholder engagement, our ability to provide information to families in real time allowed us to ensure that parents and families were as informed as possible. We also coached families 23% of the time, as they used information and resources provided to navigate the DC education landscape.

Our work would not be possible without the collaboration of partner agencies, community-based organizations and nonprofits, community leaders, our public education LEAs, and each of you, as members of the State Board of Education. Most importantly, the work would not be possible without the families we exist to serve. During the 2017-18 school year, in addition to our interactions with families through our RFA line, our office touched more than 3300 individuals through our public engagement outreach efforts. More information about our public engagement work and strategies can be found on page 20 of the report.

*Top RFA Issue Areas (see pg. 13)*

Two of the top issue areas for parents and families in SY 2017-18 were special education and enrollment/access. Since our office opened in 2015, issues of enrollment/access have trended high consistently. Enrollment/access captures questions and concerns ranging from school

choice and the lottery process to un-invite notifications from schools not communicated to parents until the next school year. In SY 2017-18, we saw an increase in calls related to special education services. Parents reached out to our office looking for special education support as it related to individual education plans (IEPs), 504 plans, initiating the evaluation process, and available resources. This increase in RFAs could be attributed to our work in the special education space with the re-launch of our “Know Your Rights” special education workshop series. Other RFA topic areas that trended high in SY 2017-18 were student safety and discipline at 24% of total RFAs. Student safety refers to issues and questions around safe passage, assault, and facilities maintenance. Student discipline is directly related to exclusionary discipline practices (suspensions and expulsions). While the two categories denote different areas of need, both categories heavily impact a school’s climate and culture and ultimately student learning outcomes.

*RFAs by School Ward (see pgs. 16-17)*

In addition to asking our callers for information about their ward of residence, we started to look at school wards to better track trends. Of our RFAs concerning schools, two thirds of our calls concerned schools in Wards 5, 7, and 8. Using ward of residence data and school ward data, we were able to provide additional context for issues that students and families experience based on their proximity to their school. These school ward/ward of residence comparisons are available on pages 16-17 of our report.

**Specific Recommendations to Highlight**

Our office is charged with recommending policy changes and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services. Each year, we provide recommendations in our annual reports based on education stakeholders’ identified needs. I would like to note that some recommendations have been repeated from years past, but we feel it necessary in order to ultimately be responsive to the needs of families. Before I close, I would like to share with you all a few specific recommendations we made this year.

- Special Education (pg. 28):

- School choice, school selection, and enrollment can be a tedious and challenging process for families. This process is even more pronounced for families who have students with specialized instruction and service needs. There is an urgent need for a resource to support parents who have children with disabilities during the school selection and enrollment process. This resource should include details regarding specific programs and supports offered at schools/LEAs as well as points of contact for families as a resource to address questions and concerns throughout the process. Giving families full access to the universe of resources and organizational supports is the first step in true school choice. The new state report card, which will be unveiled by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) later this year, would be the most appropriate place for such a resource. We also recommend this resource be available via the My School DC platform.
- Afterschool and out of school time providers and programming should also be required to list their capacity to support student with specialized instruction and service needs. This resource should be available on OSSE’s website and on the Learn24 platform. Also, LEAs should connect families of students with disabilities to this resource tool through their websites and in their printed materials.
- We have noticed that Response to Intervention (RTI) processes are not implemented evenly or with fidelity across LEAs. While schools need technical support and guidance for this process, there is no standardized RTI process or guidance for all LEAs. We recommend that OSSE, in partnership with LEAs and other parent organizations, work in coalition to develop a standardize way forward for this practice and offer clear guidance that can be followed by LEAs in their support of student needs and for Child Find purposes.
- Student Discipline (pg. 29)
  - For the third year we continue to recommend, in line with recent statutory requirements, schools should ensure that parents have physical copies of LEA discipline policies. Per the law, these policies should be accessible online. A lack of access to policies is a barrier for students and families.

Our office offers other recommendations on family engagement and partnership, student discipline, special education and mental health supports and resources, attendance and truancy, and homelessness. The additional recommendations can be found on pages 28-30.

### **Closing and Next Steps**

As we move into our fourth year of operation, I am excited to watch our work continue to grow and eager to work in partnership to promote equitable outcomes for all DC students and their families. This school year, SY2018-19, we have already made improvements to our internal processes around data collection and resource development and extended our outreach efforts with the help of local partners.

We have improved our RFA process in order to be more intentional in our data collection and reporting, and to date, we have received over 124 RFAs. We have also added a grade level field to track the correlation between grade levels and certain topic areas.

In addition to our RFA line, we have touched over 900 people to date via in-person meetings and community events. Meeting parents and families in places they show up beyond schools or education-related events has continued to be a priority for our office. At these in person meetings and events, we have been able to disseminate our resources, speak to families regarding their questions and concerns, and inform other stakeholders about our upcoming office-led trainings and events.

We've revamped our safe passage toolkit (available online) and worked to update our Parent & Family Go-To Guide (available online and printed). Our Safe Passage Community Resource Toolkit provides resources for parents and caregivers to discuss issues of safety and transportation with their children and offers strategies for reaching out to neighbors and community members to collaboratively make spaces safer and more welcoming. Our go-to

guide is a collection of parent-centered documents that serve as a quick go-to reference for parents as they work to navigate our landscape.

Understanding that more than education agencies coalesce around education-related issues, we are working to produce a DC Student Discipline Guide that explains the changes that have started to take place with the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018. This resource has been created in collaboration with The Every Student, Every Day Coalition and will be publicly released and made available on our website by the end of November 2018.

We are continuing our special education “Know Your Rights” workshop in SY 18-19. In addition to our workshop series, we have expanded the resources and tools related to special education on our website, including our workshop presentation, as both a printable handout and a webinar; a list of special education acronyms, abbreviations, and definitions; a list of resources and organizational supports; our ask sheets; and our Parent & Family Go-To Guide.

We are also continuing our partnership with DC Office of Human Rights Citywide Bullying Prevention Program by hosting additional citywide bullying workshops. There is a prolonged need for information about bullying, what it is by law, how to stop it, and how to prevent it. We see these workshops as an opportunity to continue those very necessary conversations.

We are working on a school-facing race, equity, inclusion toolkit that would provide school communities with a framework to create and sustain race, equity, and inclusion training in schools. The toolkit will provide resources for school leaders to discuss issues of educational inequities with their school community, along with strategies for reaching out to neighbors and community members to collaboratively make our schools more equitable and just spaces.

Lastly, we have worked to refresh our webpage in order to make it easier to navigate and more family-friendly and for reference to our online and printed resources as tools for assistance. Our website houses all of our information and resources (including but not limited to our toolkits,

go-to-guide, and our online Education & Community Resource Guide), our upcoming training and events, our quarterly and annual reports, and all official testimony.

I want to remind those in this room or watching elsewhere that you can reach our office via phone at 202-741-4692. Thank you for this opportunity and your continued support of our office. I welcome any questions you may have.