

Office of the Student Advocate School Year

2016-17 Annual Report

Official Written Testimony: Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate

OPENING

Good evening, members of the Board and staff. Thank you for this opportunity to share the Office of the Student Advocate's work for school year 2016-17.

Today we publicly release our 2016-17 Annual Report, which details our work for the past school year.

At this time, I would like to share some of the highlights of our work from SY 2016-17 and note projects on the horizon for this current 2017-18 school year.

MISSION

But first, let me first start by stating my name for the record. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard, and I am honored to serve in the role of Chief Student Advocate for Office of the Student Advocate. Our mission is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. In our work, our goal is to provide step-by-step assistance for students, parents, families, and all education stakeholders to ensure they are informed, connected, and empowered not only to be able to understand our complex system of public education in the District and available resources but that they are also equipped to be their own best advocates.

Roughly two and a half years ago I came into this role and met with you to present the vision and actions steps I laid out for this office. Considering the office had not existed before, my only roadmap was the legislative and statutory mandate outlined for the office. Since sharing that vision, our office has grown and our vision has evolved into real functions, programming, and resources that serve students and families throughout the District in a tangible way. In October

of 2016, our office presented our first annual report to the Board. While I was extremely proud of the progress we made in our first full school year, school year 2015-16, in school year 2016-17 our office, and its reach into the community, has grown tremendously. I sit before you tonight excited to share the amazing work undertaken over the last two and a half years by myself, and my full time staff – Dan Davis, Tiffany Wilson, and Khadijah Williams (who now works full time with Office of the Ombudsman); and our fellows: Farhana Rabbi, Ryvell Fitzpatrick, and Jordan Triplett. I want to briefly take a moment to thank my amazing staff for all of their hard work and for the passion and desire they exhibit in their roles every day to serve and support students and families in the District of Columbia. Without their tireless commitment this work, the tremendous growth and reach of our office would not be possible, and the vision for our office would not have been realized. Thank you cannot even begin to express the depth of my gratitude for their commitment to not only this work and the vision we have established together but also for their commitment and belief in me and my leadership.

WHAT WE DO

So now that I have shared with you my excitement and gratitude for my phenomenal staff, let me tell you more about our office and the work we do in support of and in partnership with families, schools, and communities.

We work in partnership with families and communities in order to promote equity in family engagement. Our office's work supports families and communities in three distinct ways:

1. by gaining insight into the needs of students and families,
2. by partnering with stakeholders to address systemic issues, and
3. by developing resources, presentations, trainings, and workshops.

We are able to gain insight into the needs of families and communities by:

- Addressing needs and questions surrounding public education with our Request for Assistance line, streamlining the information-gathering process for students, parents, and families

- Increasing outreach and visibility in communities to have direct dialogue that lends insight into relevant issues and areas of opportunity
- Organizing and/or participating in community events to be a part of relevant public education conversations and establish relationships with stakeholders
- Developing partnerships and coalitions to engage in both formal and informal discussions with community leaders, community-based organizations, and government agencies to amplify student and parent voice

Once we have said insight, we work to connect students and families to resources and tools that address their individual needs and supports their ability to navigate the education landscape and self-advocate.

Finally, with voice activated in our work, we are able to ensure access for families in the policymaking process, from formation to implementation to review. This is done through special interest working groups in order to create solutions or work plans of interest to families and the needs of their students.

HOW WE DID IT (HIGHLIGHTS OF WORK FROM SY 16-17)

We recognize that we are in a very unique position with our office's structure. The structure of our office allows us to address community concerns on a day-to-day and a systemic level by aligning community and governmental goals. While there is an abundance of organizations, agencies, and offices that support families, there is a void due to lack of coordinated efforts and the absence of a centralized place to gain public education information and resources.

For the past two and half years, our office has served as a place to have questions answered, concerns addressed, conversations sparked, partnerships fostered, and resources provided—all centered on public education and the systems that affect its functions and outcomes. It is imperative that we not only acknowledge educational intersections but also shape our work to address issues that affect parents and families in a less compartmentalized way.

OUR LENS FOR EQUITY

Like many others in the city, our office continues to have an increased focus on equity and what that means in terms of our day-to-day work. It is no secret that the history and persistence of inequities in the District of Columbia, on a variety of fronts, from education to housing to jobs, etc. — coupled with widening gaps in student achievement, opportunity, and the belief in our students and families — set the stage for a continuous need and extended reach of engagement at the family and community level. In our work, we recognized a need for equity in all aspects of public education and areas which impact education, but we have narrowed our focus on equity within family engagement — specifically through the lens of parent, student, and community VOICE, ACCESS, and POWER due to the critical role it plays in student success. Our focus on family engagement as a lever for achieving equity is rooted in the belief that families, students, and community members are powerful and grossly underutilized catalysts who can provide meaningful programmatic and systemic change.

Our lens for equity recognizes that families are the ultimate source of knowledge regarding the needs of their children. We know that families, as equal thought-partners in this work, and their voices are essential in education policy and practice decisions. Through the unique lens of their lived experiences, families are highly invested in the success of their children, other children, and their community.

One of my favorite scholars, Dr. Joyce Epstein illustrates this partnership with families in her Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence. This model shows how the needs of a child can only be met, and their success is only possible, where there is an overlapping of support from not only the school but the child's family and community as well. This equal partnership makes way for equitable outcomes and possibilities for our students and ensures that family and student voice is a central focus.

Our lens for equity, through a focus on student and family VOICE, ACCESS, and POWER — along with Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence — has greatly impacted the focus on our work for school year 2016-17 and beyond.

DATA AND OTHER WORK

Now I would like to share with you a few of the specifics from the data we shared in our annual report. I will first start with the top RFA issue areas, which can be found on page 16 of the report.

Top RFA Issue Areas

One of the top issue areas for our office in SY 2016-17 were inquiries regarding enrollment and access. Even with the development of the common lottery system, which simplified the process of applying to and enrolling in school, confusion still remained at various times of the school year for varying reasons. In addition to enrollment, questions regarding attendance and truancy were also top concerns. DME's Every Day Counts! task force, which focuses on issues regarding truancy and attendance, was a positive step in the right direction to make this process work for families, yet many families still expressed a lack of understanding and knowledge regarding our citywide school attendance policies. Other top issues included student safety, student discipline, special education, and academics and instruction.

Next I would like to share with you are RFA Ward breakdown, which can be found on pages 13 and 14 of the report.

RFAs by Ward

This past school year, our office more than doubled the amount of families served with our Request for Assistance line from 135 calls to 336 calls, reflected on page 13. This represents a 150% increase, which can be attributed to three factors: 1) our ability to provide customer support in real time by answering the line live Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; 2) secondly, an increased awareness of our office and services; and (3) third, the partnerships we have forged as an office with other organizations and entities who serve families in various capacities. Our work with students and families allows us to connect RFA inquiries to the development of trainings, resources, and outreach efforts.

In addition to our ward breakdown information we also disaggregate our RFA data by sector, which can be found on page 14 of the report.

RFAs by Sector

The majority of RFAs came from Wards 7 and 8, which have the largest number of school-aged children in the city. Wards 5, 6, and 4 follow, respectively. Roughly two-thirds, or 66%, of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. More calls from DCPS families is a result of several factors: 1) DCPS is the largest LEA in the District with approximately 115 school locations allowing information for support to flow easier from staff to parent; 2) with DCPS being one large LEA, there is easier information-sharing access to multiple schools, school officials, and families in all 8 wards. 24% of our RFAs for SY 16-17 came from public charter schools, with 5% from non-public schools and 5% from students not enrolled or un-enrolled.

Referral Agencies (See pg.15)

In SY 2016-17, we made substantial outreach efforts and commitments to work with community-based organizations, which allowed our office to connect more deeply with our most vulnerable families through organizational partners they trust. From this past school year, we were proud to see that majority of our referrals, which can be found on page 15 of the report, came from first from community organizations, at 23%, followed by individual schools, at 22%, and then by DCPS Central Office, at 16%. We also continue to appreciate our partnership with the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education. Their support of our office is reflected in many ways and one of those ways are in the referral of families they send to our office for additional support.

Resolutions

The majority of our RFAs resolutions, which can be found on page 15 of the report, entailed connecting families to resources, agencies, and organizations. We also provided families with a significant amount of coaching, which supports and encourages self- advocacy in navigating 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, the State Board of Education. Most importantly, the work would not be possible without the families we exist to serve. During the 2016-17 school year, in addition to our interactions

with families through our RFA line, our office touched more than 2000 individuals through our public engagement outreach efforts. More information about our public engagement work and strategies can be found on page 17 of the report. Our office had the opportunity to present and meet with numerous groups, from community-based organizations to parent groups to government stakeholders. As a result of our focus on relationship building, we consistently receive referrals from DC Council, DCPS Central Office, Public Charter School Board, school administrators, and community-based organizations.

While our staff capacity does not allow for us to operate Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters related to public education, we do have our online Education and Community Resource Guide, which was created and designed with the intention of filling that void. Launched in 2015, the online guide is the first citywide initiative of its kind. It offers more than 400 resource listings organized into over 30 category areas, providing a roadmap for students, parents, and families as they navigate public education in the District. While we update the guide periodically to ensure that all resources are relevant and useful, the guide is updated in its entirety quarterly.

In an effort to streamline the information-gathering process for parents and families, we have also increased the number of resources available on our website. Our online resources have expanded to include attendance and truancy resources, behavioral and mental health resources, homelessness resources, and “Right to Know” ask sheets that offer questions for parents to ask both themselves and school staff. Families should be informed about their rights and knowledgeable about resources available to them to eliminate barriers and promote equitable outcomes.

In our report this year, we primarily focus on tapping into the expertise of parents and students as leaders through family and community engagement, collaboration, and partnership as well as student discipline. This focus is reflected in our discussion of our parent leadership series, found on page 20 of the report, and our LEA discipline policy analysis work, discussed on page

23 of the report. Our focus on these topics is a result of reoccurring conversations with families regarding their lack of knowledge, which has proven to be a barrier to access for families.

Before I close, I would like to share with you a few of the specific recommendations we've made this year:

Student Discipline: A more collaborative approach in student discipline means the development of a greater understanding of discipline processes and increased buy-in for policies.

Partnerships between students, parents, and administrators are essential to determine which responses address the needs of the school community and the students and families served. To that end, we will share two of the seven recommendations, which can be found on page 28 of the report:

1. The development of a state advisory panel focused on the review of student discipline is essential. This advisory panel, to be managed and facilitated by the state education agency (the Office of the State Superintendent of Education OSSE), should be comprised of parents, students, and school/ LEA leaders and staff and should have the authority to review individual LEA discipline policies to provide policy recommendations, and to recommend necessary implementation supports to OSSE for their consideration. We believe the implementation of such a group at the state level would promote the engagement of parents and students in regular conversations and decision-making processes to monitor student discipline policies and recommend changes or reforms as necessary.
2. At the LEA level, the development of a student discipline advisory committee – comprised of parents, students, and educators – would allow schools to regularly review their student discipline policies, while including parent and student voice, and work toward the streamlining of their policies in order to best meet the need of students. This process could also facilitate the process of LEAs ensuring that families and students understand, and are familiar with, their discipline policies, procedures, and processes.

Other Public Education Concerns: It is no surprise that special education and the process of finding mental health supports and resources is extremely nuanced, complex, and challenging for families to navigate. In this area, we offer three specific recommendations. I would like to offer one of those today:

1. In the absence of comprehensive mental health supports at the school level, it is essential for LEAs to share citywide behavioral/mental health resources and supports with families. Useful tools, such as the Behavioral Health Resource Directory (located on the Department of Behavioral Health's website), support families in understanding the myriad of resources and services geared toward fostering self-reliance and recovery for students and their 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

As we move into our third year, I am excited to watch this work continue to grow in a way that increases access and promotes equitable outcomes for the students and families we serve. This year, SY 2017-18, we have already made strides to improve our data collection, extend our outreach, and increase opportunities to engage with students and families.

We have improved our RFA process in order to be more responsive. So far, for SY17-18, we have received over 130 calls surpassing the amount of requests received at this time last year. We are excited to launch "pop-ups" to physically meet parents and families not just at schools or education-related events, but where they are in order to address their public education concerns and help them be their student's best advocate. We have also generated "Right to Know" ask sheets that are helpful conversation starters for parents and families when interacting with teachers/school administrators.

Currently, we are altering our approach to our special education workshops in order to provide a more interactive experience for parents and families. While we want parents to be aware of their rights and protections, we also want them to be able to workshop their concerns and know what offices and organization can support and meet their individual needs.

Similarly, we are restructuring our approach to our parent leadership series as we extend our work to Ward 8. This school year, we are putting a greater emphasis of partnership in hopes to make our reach more impactful and sustainable. In addition, we'll be releasing our "Fast Five" series in hopes to demystify and increase parents' and families' understanding of public education governance structure in our city. Parents and families should know exactly how education agencies (and all agencies related to education) function for them. We will continue to refresh and disseminate our resource guide, streamline our internal processes to better serve families, expand our programming, trainings, and series to additional wards, and further develop and increase partnerships.

Lastly, we have launched our Parent & Student Advisory Committee to foster conversations and uncover solutions about the issues all stakeholders face within DC's public education landscape. This committee's purpose is to provide an outlet for parents and students to assist the Office of the Student Advocate in better serving families throughout DC and to foster conversations and uncover solutions about the issues all stakeholders face within DC's public education landscape.

It is with excitement and optimism that I present to you our annual report for the 2016-17 school year.

Before I close, I want to remind those in this room or watching elsewhere that you can reach our office via phone at 202-741-4692, via email at student.advocate@dc.gov, or online at studentadvocate.dc.gov. Thank you for this opportunity and your continued support of our office! I welcome any questions you may have.