

OFFICE OF THE
STUDENT
ADVOCATE

2017 Annual Report

Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
DC State Board of Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In school year (SY) 2016-17, we focused on expanding the services our office offers in support of students and families throughout all 8 wards of the city. By leveraging our connections and partnerships with government agencies, schools, and community-based organizations and increasing our strategic outreach efforts, our office has nurtured vital working relationships that are student and family centric. The core of our work focuses on equity through the framework of student and parent voice. Our work in this space is focused on ensuring that the voices of students and families are at the forefront of all public education policy discussions and processes, which creates access to quality educational opportunities, resources, and services. Leveraging the power and voices of students and families at the decision-making table is an essential step as the city works to tackle the myriad of systemic issues surrounding public education in the District.

We decided to focus intently on the following issues for SY 2016-17:

- ▶ Answering our Request for Assistance line, which is a "311" system for public education, LIVE Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. to address any education-related questions public school families, or prospective families, might have and to provide connection to resources and referrals.
- ▶ Doubling the amount of families we served through our Request for Assistance line from only 135 calls in SY 2015-16 to nearly 350 calls in SY 2016-17.
- ▶ Engaging with over 2000 individuals outside of our office walls and Request for Assistance process by increasing our outreach to parents, families, service providers, and government agencies that serve families in need of support from the District's social safety net.
- ▶ Attending over 200 events and meetings citywide to be a part of relevant public education conversations.
- ▶ Working in partnership with Council for Court Excellence and Howard University School of Law to collect and analyze all of the local education agencies' (LEAs) student discipline policies. This partnership was established in an effort to craft and share policy recommendations for a streamlined discipline policy based on our analysis.
- ▶ Developing and facilitating training sessions focused on understanding the public education governance structure for service provider, school-based and community-based organizations, and providers for families that are from at-risk or disenfranchised communities.
- ▶ Translating and creating resources and materials for non-English or limited-English speaking families in 6 different languages.
- ▶ Continuing our parent leadership work and advocacy training series in Ward 7.
- ▶ Creating citywide parent leadership and advocacy tools available online through our Parent Leadership & Advocacy toolkits.
- ▶ Sharing vital resource information to families and communities through our easy to access online Education & Community Resource Guide, which includes over 400 educational resources.
- ▶ Leading a working group, comprised of government and community-based members, focused on the issue of safe passage for our students. This work included the development of a Safe Passage Resource Toolkit for schools and families.

We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our families and assist them in becoming informed, connected, and empowered to take control of their children's education, and we look forward to a successful next year!

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LETTER FROM THE STUDENT ADVOCATE

November 15, 2017

To: District of Columbia State Board of Education

It is with great excitement that I present to you the School Year 2016-17 Annual Report for the Office of the Student Advocate.

For the last two school years, our office has diligently worked to carve out our space in the city's public education landscape. In our work, we provide guidance and resource supports to families in order to assist them in navigating our complex system of public education in the District of Columbia, both DCPS and public charter schools.

Since the establishment of our office, it has continuously been our goal to ensure that families are able to be informed, connected, and empowered not only to be able to understand our complex public education landscape and to be aware of available resources, but also to be equipped to be their own best advocates.

In school year 2016-17, we focused our work in the area of educational equity through student and parent voice. This focus is evident through:

- ▶ Our increased outreach and strategic engagement efforts with families;
- ▶ The creation of more online resource and training supports for families, schools, and community-based organizations who work directly with families;
- ▶ The expansion of our partnerships with government offices and community-based organizations to serve families in even more diverse ways to meet their unique needs; and
- ▶ Our commitment to being engaged in relevant policy discussions and processes in order to remove systemic barriers for families while offering policy recommendations for the improvement of the quality of public education for all students in the District.

We know that students and parents are the very foundation of a quality public education system, but we cannot avoid acknowledging that their voices have not been at the forefront of our education policy conversations and decisions in a truly meaningful way. As the parent of a public school student in the District, and as a passionate public education advocate, there is one thing of which I am certain – students, parents, and families are experts. In order to see the expertise of students and families at work, we must do two things:

- ▶ First, afford families the information and resource access they deserve; and
- ▶ Secondly, force ourselves, as education professionals and elected officials, to step back and make room for the inclusion of the collective power of families at our decision-making tables.

Watching the work of our office blossom and grow is truly an honor. We will continue to bring awareness to the value of meaningful parent and student engagement and the vital role it plays in designing a system committed to the success of all students in the District. We look forward to working closely with the Board to best support students and families in the coming school year.

Sincerely,



Faith Gibson Hubbard





OFFICE OF THE STUDENT ADVOCATE

STAFF

Faith Gibson Hubbard, *Chief Student Advocate*

Dan Davis, *Student Advocate*

Khadijah Williams, *Program Associate*
(for SY 2015-16 & SY 2016-17)

Tiffany Wilson, *Program Associate*
(started October 2017)

2016-2017 Student Advocate Fellows

Farhana Rabbi • Ryvell D. Fitzpatrick

Tiffany Wilson • Jordan Triplett

HISTORY

Prior to the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA), the District had gone through several governance changes. Initially, the District incorporated community voice through an elected local school board with budget, decision-making, and personnel power that was directly accountable to the community.¹ The implementation of PERAA brought forth mayoral control and the removal of day-to-day oversight from the school board. Mayoral control led to the division of oversight into three bodies — the Executive Office of the Mayor, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). Operational accountability was diverted to the Mayor, and the local school board became the State Board of Education, an elected body responsible for advising the State Superintendent of Education on policy matters and state-level policy approval.

While mayoral control sought to provide additional accountability for a struggling school system, the Mayor's lack of proximity to schools limited community voice, inadvertently removing the direct mechanism for community members to raise questions regarding public education and to address school-related problems.

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013 addressed community members' need for a direct advocate within government who focused primarily and exclusively on making the newly complex education system more accessible. As a result, the Office of the Student Advocate was established.

LEGISLATIVE MANDATE

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013² established the Office of the Student Advocate "to represent students and parents on issues regarding public education in the District of Columbia" in seven distinct ways:

FIRST, by providing outreach to students, parents, and guardians regarding public education in the District of Columbia;

SECOND, by supporting the education and achievement of all public school students and their families in interactions with school personnel through support and advocacy;

THIRD, by assisting in the facilitation of the school enrollment process for current students and prospective families;

FOURTH, by operating a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information regarding relevant public education resources and agency/organizational referrals;

FIFTH, if requested, to serve as an advocate for students in conflict resolution proceedings before the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education;

SIXTH, to track trends and inquiries presented to the office and their referral or resolution;

And **SEVENTH**, to recommend policy changes, staff trainings, and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services.²

OUR LENS FOR EQUITY

Equity Through Family and Student Voice

From the Federal Perspective

From the very beginning of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," the idea of parental involvement in public education emerged. Parental involvement was viewed as one of the foundational components of how to remedy social ills found not only in public education but also in the broader context of society.³ The development and subsequent passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), hailed as the law that established education as a civil right⁴, laid the groundwork for early programs such as Head Start and Title I of ESEA, ultimately shaping the family and community engagement practices in public education we are familiar with today, both locally and federally.

Research and policy surrounding parent engagement underwent important shifts during the 1990s in which researchers began to evaluate the impact of the role of families on student achievement.^{5,6} During this phase of parental involvement, parents were "treated as clients or beneficiaries whose best interests were known by [faculty and staff of the education agency]."⁷ This research resulted in practices that included well-intentioned strategies that increased the imbalance of power between parents, schools, and educational agencies.⁸ In 1995, Dr. Joyce Epstein developed *Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement*, a framework that identified and explained the different levels at which parents can be involved, thus creating a roadmap for understanding the role parents play in their child's overall success.⁸ This framework shows the progression of parent involvement from "parenting" to "collaborating with community" and highlights the vital role parents play in this process. In 2013, Mapp and Kuttner created and published a new dual-capacity framework for family engagement for the U.S. Department of Education, which focused on educational achievement by strengthening the capacity of both families and schools. This framework recognizes the roles that non-parent family members, such as siblings or multi-generational caregivers, have on student success and views the involvement of such families as a crucial part of any equitable school system.⁹

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, echoes the principle of public education as a civil right, while

further clarifying "full education opportunity... [as the] first national goal."¹⁰ While ESSA maintains some of the increased school and district level accountability through standardized testing originally established in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) reauthorization of ESEA, it also works to broaden and bring clarity to the roles schools, families, and communities play in public education and highlights their unique sets of needs.¹¹ NCLB exposed many challenges in public education through its one-size fits all approach to education and the achievement gaps,¹¹ which widened during its time; however, with the passage of ESSA, principles and practices of meaningful family and community engagement became a part of equitable education policy discussion, with a need for family-informed methods, on a national level. The new ESSA requirements prioritize family engagement by only providing funding to districts under Title I if the districts do the following:¹²

- ▶ Develop a parent and family engagement policy;
- ▶ Conduct outreach to all parents and family members;
- ▶ Establish family and parent involvement objectives and expectations;
- ▶ Build schools' capacity for meaningful family engagement;
- ▶ Link family engagement with other District programs;
- ▶ Develop and implement an evaluation system for continuous improvement;
- ▶ Ensure parent and family involvement in the activities of Title I schools; and
- ▶ Reserve a minimum amount of funding for family and parent engagement.

While the expansion of federal legislation around family engagement through Title I and its funding is a welcome change, there is still a need to effectively implement engagement policies to address the needs of schools ineligible for Title I funding. While this need has existed for some time, shifting the conversation from parent involvement to parent engagement has started to address parents in relation to schools and education in a more comprehensive way.^{13,14} This transition from involvement to engagement has required a focus on parent-

teacher communications,¹⁵ parental involvement in homework,¹⁶ the effect of parents' aspirations on academic achievement,¹⁷ parents' participation in school activities,¹⁸ and the home environment's effect on student success.¹⁹ According to Karen Mapp's *Dual Capacity Framework*,²⁰ the shift from parent involvement to parent engagement requires the following:

- ▶ the incorporation of professional development;
- ▶ a school climate that prioritizes student learning;
- ▶ partnerships between parents and school staff;
- ▶ classroom and instructional guidance; and
- ▶ effective leadership on both the policy development level and the grassroots level.²⁰

All too often, parents' access to the school is limited. Parents are relegated to coming to a meeting at the school between a set number of hours to sit in a specific area and listen to a scripted lecture or asked to participate in making decisions on inconsequential matters.²¹ In order to harvest the full potential of all stakeholders, there must be a movement from family engagement that brings families into pre-determined actions to family partnership, brainstorming policy ideas based on parent priorities and implementing fully realized policies created alongside families.

Investments on the Local Level

A federal legislative approach is only one element in reforming the challenges facing public education. Real change and implementation actions take place on the local and grassroots levels. Since its inception, public education in the District has experienced various transitions in leadership, vision, and governance structures. When ESEA was originally enacted, a local school board appointed by Congress governed public education in the District.¹² This governance was marked by the avoidance of demands of an increasingly black community for equity in education, including increased political power, governance over schools, and desegregation.²² By the late 1960s, both the school district and the city were predominately African American, yet the school district was governed through significant oversight by a predominately white Congress.²⁸ This structural dynamic raised concerns about "a situation in which white officials imposed their priorities on black citizens who had no voice

in electing them."²⁸ In 1969, the first elected school board took office.²⁵ Although the transition to home rule²³ in 1973 helped decrease some of the civil rights concerns within school district, the elected school board was often criticized for low student achievement results and issues with overall management of the system.^{25, 24} As a result of continued low performance of District schools, Congress took the opportunity to "test some of their ideas for privatizing the management and delivery of public education"²⁵ by creating the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) and introducing public charter schools into the District landscape in 1994. From the late 1970s until the early 2000s, public schools in the District experienced not only a decline in the student population but also a decline in trust in the system. Fortunately, subsequent reforms and structural changes have led to steady improvements and growth in public schools – both in DCPS and public charters – since the early 2000s.

While ESSA offers promising principles and initiatives from the federal perspective, public schools in the District made huge strides in family engagement long before the recent federal focus. For example, the implementation of family engagement initiatives have become a primary focus for public schools throughout the District. On the school level, DCPS has utilized the services of Flamboyan,²⁶ a foundation that trains teachers to improve academic outcomes by partnering more effectively with families through home visits to help develop Family Engagement Partnerships²⁷ aimed at strengthening relationships between teachers and families. Additionally, the implementation of local school advisory teams allows parents, teachers, staff, and community members to advise school leadership on decisions regarding student expectations and achievement. On the advocacy level, DCPS' Community Action Team²⁸ engages key community



stakeholders who are traditionally underutilized by assigning a community action team member to every ward.²⁹ Lastly, the Chancellor's Parent Cabinet³⁰ allows the Chancellor an opportunity to directly engage with parents on issues affecting students and families. The introduction of academic parent-teacher teams, a partnership between parents and teachers, has created opportunities in which the individual needs of students can be collectively determined, through partnership, to support academic success. Recently, the Chancellor created a Student Cabinet to directly engage with students regarding their issues, needs, ideas, and concerns.

Similarly, public charter schools have also implemented family engagement and involvement initiatives to foster a greater sense of partnership with families. For example, some public charter schools host family events, such as partnerships and advisory boards, which afford parents the opportunity to give input surrounding school-wide and local education agency (LEA)-wide decisions. One of the more macro-level organizations, Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), supports charter parents through leadership development thus increasing parental involvement and voice at both the education policy and implementation levels. Furthermore, PAVE's development of Parent Leader in Education (PLE) Boards,³¹ their annual parent summit, and the inclusion of parent voice on the Ward 8 Parent Operator Selection Team (POST)³² are all opportunities to engage parents more deeply in the policy process regarding decision-making and the overall success of their children and communities. Additionally, DC PCSB has also invested in family and community engagement through: public comment on the school chartering process and policies at monthly meetings; the collection of parent complaints and concerns through their hotline; and the engagement of parents and school communities by their community engagement specialist. Additionally, DC PCSB has a Parent and Alumni Leadership Council who directly advises the Board on issues and policy pertaining to charter schools. In addition to DC PCSB's investments, each public charter LEA must have the representation of at least one parent on their local LEA governing board. Similarly, Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) helps inform the community, including parents, on charter schools, development, and other technical assistance. Additionally, most public charter school LEAs have implemented a staff role focused on family engagement. While this role looks different across LEAs, we have seen these efforts show up in

supporting the ideals of equity, through the equity and fidelity team, and family engagement, through the expansion of their communications department.

From a citywide perspective, the 2007 PERAA legislation established a Deputy Mayor for Education, tasked with "overseeing a District-wide education strategy, managing interagency and cross-sector coordination, and providing oversight and/or support for several education related agencies."³³ Although the DME was tasked with supporting collaboration between education agencies and sectors, the role has focused primarily on policy level. Furthermore, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the State Board of Education have advisory panels and task forces which are opportunities for students, parents, and community members to participate in policy processes and decision-making collaboratively. While applying for membership is open to all, the final decisions are usually determined through a selective process, which limits the size of participation. As of late, OSSE has started to expand their interactions with the engagement of families through the implementation of ESSA and the development of the new state report card. What does not exist are a variety of opportunities for families and communities to engage in a way that provides a low barrier to entry that is inclusive of other decision-making opportunities outside of large scale processes.

While the aforementioned initiatives are plentiful and comprehensive, cross-sector collaboration or coordination of family engagement initiatives on the citywide level has been limited in size, scope, and scale. Prior to the Office of the Student Advocate, there had been no one agency responsible for coordinating family engagement initiatives on a citywide level. Through our work, services, and initiatives, we look to fill that void and spark broader collaboration not just on behalf of families, but with families as true partners in the process.

Equity Through the Lens of Family Engagement

How We Support Equity and Access Through Our Work: Our Role in Family Partnership

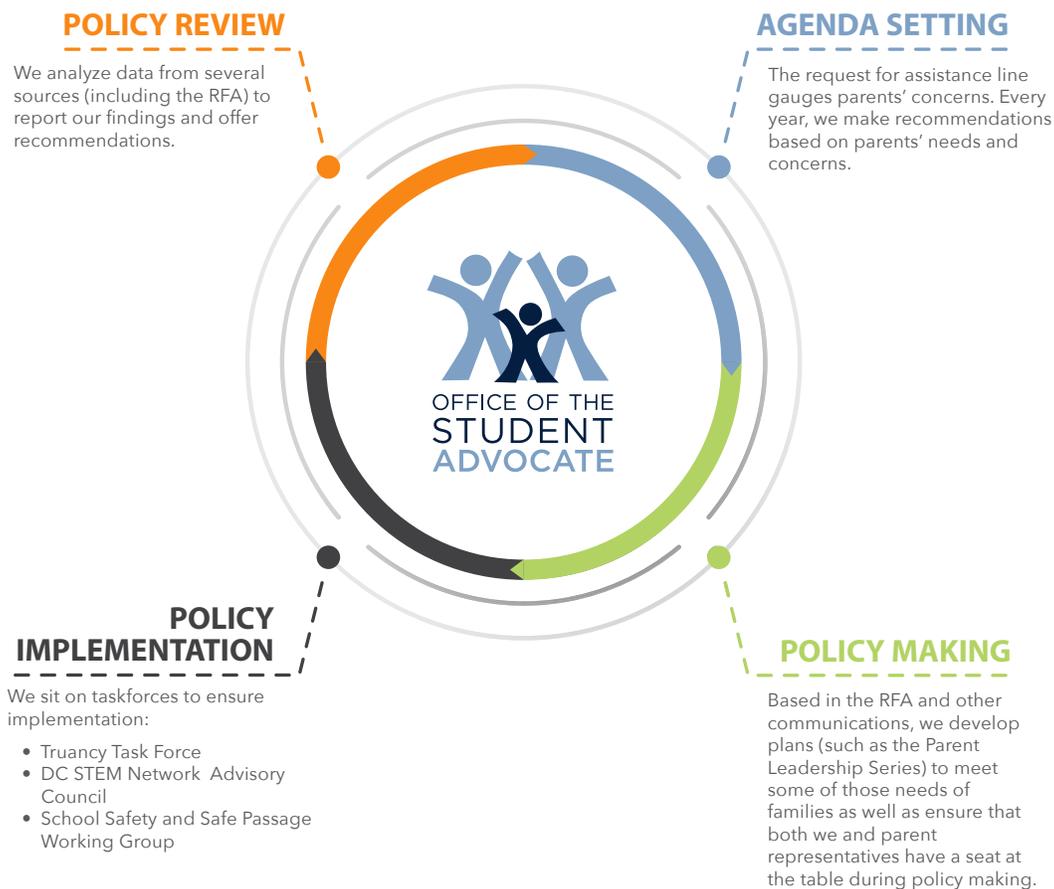
To help ensure family and community voice are at the forefront of policy development and implementation, the Office of the Student Advocate serves as a liaison and convener focused on the voice of families and communities. This work entails supporting, equipping, and positioning families to be able to be their own

best advocates through training, resource sharing, and leadership development. Our office supplements this work through collaborative partnerships with government entities and community organizations on topics of importance to families through office-developed panels, workshops, and community events; early identification of issues through one-on-one conversations with parents, educators, and community organizations; and highlighting policy gaps through policy one-pagers, how-tos, and online trainings. Our outreach, advocacy, and engagement with families eliminates barriers to collaboration through the coordination of siloed efforts, raising issues of importance to parents regardless of political agenda or priority of government agencies, and representation of the parent and student voice in task forces, government stakeholder meetings, and public hearings.

Our approach aims to:

- ▶ Shift the balance of power in favor of our community members by convening stakeholders at all levels around topics of community importance;
- ▶ Develop and support the knowledge base of students, parents, and community stakeholders;
- ▶ Ensure that family and community perspectives are included in all relevant public education conversations; and
- ▶ Mobilize community-level leadership in grassroots education advocacy.

OSA INTERVENTION THROUGHOUT FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

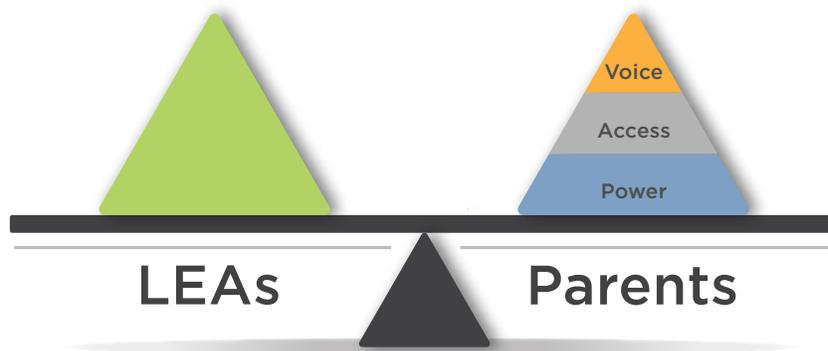


Policy Cycle was adapted from James E. Anderson in his Public Policy Making (1974)

OUR LENS FOR CHANGE:

Defining Family Engagement — Voice, Access, Power

The history and persistence of inequities in the District — 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.^{34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39}



The work of the Office of the Student Advocate is to equalize the balance of power between parents and LEAs by increasing parent voice, access, and power. We do this primarily by making sure parents are connected, informed, and empowered. We do this specifically through efforts like the Parent Leadership Series, our Request for Assistance Line, being present at pertinent conversations, and helping parents utilize their power to increase access and voice.

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.

A Model for Equity: The Family Collaboration and Partnership Model

Our work and equity focus are captured in our model of collaboration and partnership with families. Our model includes the following elements:

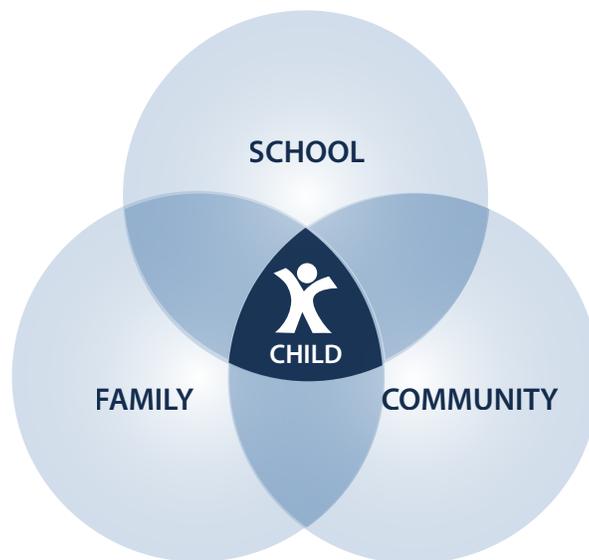
- ▶ A focus on how family engagement initiatives:
 1. Consider and incorporate the ability of parents and students to have a voice in processes and decision-making;
 2. Ensure access to resources and understanding of the processes and structures; and
 3. Share power with students and parents to be a part of the advancement of educational outcomes through decision-making which gives way to equitable outcomes and resembles the varying demographics of that school's parent population.
- ▶ Families, as a collective stakeholder, must own an equitable portion of the responsibility to adequately educate our students.

While we developed this model with the understanding that family engagement initiatives strive to ensure equitable family voice and access,²¹ it is also necessary for the power shared between schools, families, and communities to be relational.⁴⁰ Loomer’s concept of relational power promotes the idea that power is not finite and that sharing power with families does not limit the amount of power that schools have⁴¹; rather it understands that, as stakeholders, families, schools, and communities each have roles to play in the educational achievement of students.

- ▶ The first prong requires the use of three instruments: voice, access, and power. Voice ensures that parents’ perspectives are heard, prioritized, and sought; access ensures parents have a priority seat at the decision-making table; and power ensures the priorities of parents are integral to policy development. It is imperative that this perspective is integrated throughout the school system – which requires a shift in how we view families.
- ▶ The second prong of the approach is necessary because shared power should be accompanied by shared responsibility. This concept of shared responsibility is captured in Epstein’s *Overlapping Spheres of Influence*.⁴² This concept reiterates the notion that the experiences, philosophies, and practices of the school, family, and community influence the success of a child, thus requiring shared power over and responsibility for the educational success of students.

Equity within these prongs means that every parent is able to have a seat at the table, be heard, and have the power to influence. Although not every parent can literally sit at the table when stakeholders meet to determine policies, equitable parent partnership allows every parent’s voice to be at the table through their access to the decision-making process.⁴¹

EPSTEIN’S OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE



Epstein, J.L. (2009). Conceptualizing and Defining Family Involvement for Research: Setting New Directions [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from http://iapr.unl.edu/videos/ppts/1_Epstein.pdf.



HOW OUR OFFICE WORKS WITH FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

Our commitment to promoting equity in family engagement through voice, access, and power is reflected in the day-to-day operations of our office. Power and access are only effective when the voices of families are recognized. In order to ensure parent voice is amplified, we work to gain insight into the needs of families and communities. The primary way we achieve this is with our Request for Assistance (RFA) line. With our RFA line, we are able to address questions about the public education system and streamline the information-gathering process for parents and students. We supplement insight gained through requests for assistance by conducting dialogue-centered community surveys. Hearing from communities directly allows us to then organize, facilitate, and/or participate in community events that help establish relationships and provide more opportunities for discussion. These actions, in addition to our partnerships, coalitions, formal and informal discussions with community leaders, community-based organizations, and government agencies serve two purposes:

- ▶ To elevate community issues to the forefront by ensuring our proximity to community perspective; and
- ▶ To ensure that all parents, regardless of experience or comfort in engaging in advocacy, will be heard and understood by our office.

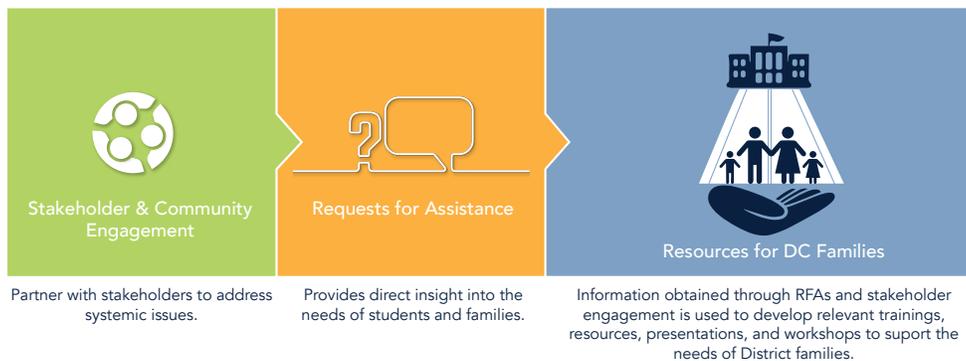
Once voice is activated in our work, we are able to ensure access by connecting students and families with resources to address their needs or to navigate the education landscape in order to improve their ability to self-advocate. We meet this goal in three ways:

1. We provide one-on-one coaching for families as they seek the outcome they intend for their family or the city-wide education system;
2. Facilitate issue specific or community specific workshops and trainings; and
3. Connect families directly to additional resources through referrals to other organizations and agencies for further, targeted support.

Voice and access have a powerful effect on our families. When families are recognized for their insights and given opportunities to utilize those insights at all levels of government, they are able to activate their inherent power to serve as catalysts for change.

We use several processes and reinforcements to ensure voice through conversations, access through the connection with resources, and power by interjecting and elevating voice.

HOW OUR WORK SUPPORTS FAMILIES





REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE LINE

The Office of the Student Advocate operates a public education hotline, or the Request for Assistance (RFA) line, which is answered live Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. The RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to answer public education related questions and inquiries.⁴³ 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.

Our work with students and parents allows us to connect the RFA inquiries to the development of issue-focused trainings, resources, and outreach efforts. These resources and initiatives work to tackle systemic issues and remove barriers for students and families. This work supports the ability of students and families to have equal access to a quality public education through the understanding and knowledge of how the system works on their behalf.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, PARTNERSHIPS, AND COALITIONS

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 2016-17 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.⁴⁴ These efforts have afforded our office the opportunity to extend our services deeper into the community. As a direct result of our office’s relationship-building and resource-sharing, we consistently receive referrals from DC Council, State Board of Education, Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, DCPS Central Office, DC Public Charter School Board, school and local level administrators, and community-based organizations.

Our outreach to schools through school visits and in-person opportunities for engagement with families are another essential component of our work.



EDUCATION & COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE

One statutory provision for our office is the creation and operation of Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters regarding public education.⁴⁵ Our Education & Community Resource Guide initially served as a way for our small staff to fill the void of centralized public education information and resource centers; however, it has proven to be an effective method of providing relevant resources to families and increasing access throughout the District.

The online Education & Community Resource 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 over 30 category areas. The resource 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. It highlights organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. This guide not only assists our office in fulfilling our mission, but also provides access to a wealth of resources, agencies, and organizations that directly impact education and educational attainment. Along with providing information, the guide 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.

To ensure that all relevant and useful resources are available, we have created a supplemental document that is updated periodically with any new resources that have been brought to our awareness. The entire guide is updated on a quarterly basis.



ONLINE INFORMATION & RESOURCE TOOLS

In an effort to streamline information that helps parents better understand the public education

system, policies, and procedures, we have developed various resource supports available on our website. Most recently, we have generated Right to Know ask sheets that offer questions for parents to ask both themselves and school staff regarding topic areas like attendance, behavior expectations, and even special education. Having parents know what questions to ask during interactions with teachers and administrators gives them a greater understanding and ultimately greater access to conversations they would not normally be a part of.

We have also developed a variety of resources and toolkits for families that are accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Our online resources include:

- ▶ Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- ▶ Attendance & Truancy Resources
- ▶ Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- ▶ Effective Communication Toolkit
- ▶ Enrollment Resource
- ▶ Graduation Requirements Resource
- ▶ Homelessness Resources
- ▶ Parent Leadership Toolkit
- ▶ Right to Know Ask Sheets
- ▶ Safe Passage
- ▶ Special Education & Other School Supports Resources
- ▶ Student Leadership Information & Resources
- ▶ Testing & Assessments Resource
- ▶ District Government Structures Resource

Through this work, our office promotes equitable outcomes by eliminating the barriers to information and entry that families often face. The information gleaned from this work allows us to further develop additional resources and trainings to better support families.





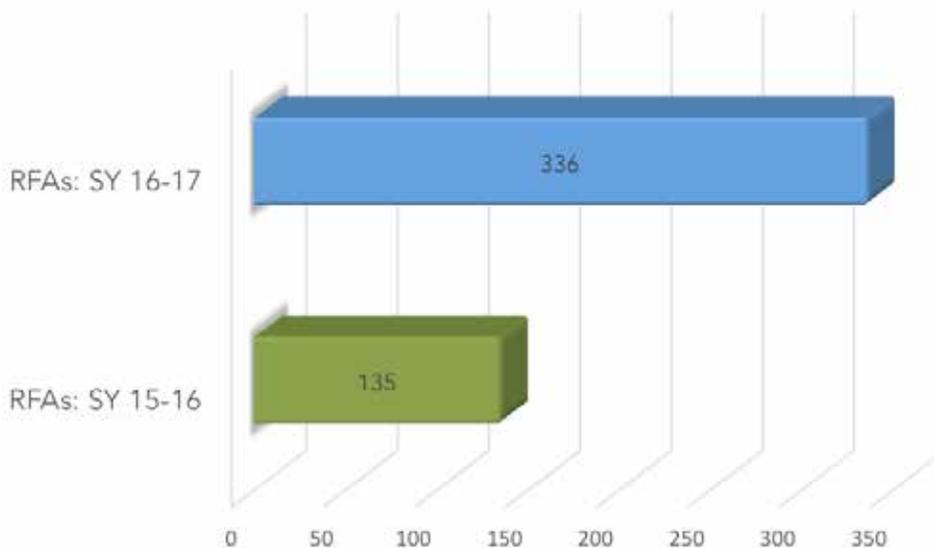
DATA, TRENDS, & ANALYSIS – LOOKING INTO AND BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Our office’s ability to best serve families requires analysis of the three facets of our work – responding to requests for assistance, providing resources for families, and partnering with stakeholders to address systemic issues. Data collection is a critical part of our work and allows us to continually assess the state of public education and evaluate outcomes for students throughout the District.

In SY 2016-17, we were able to support over 330 callers through our Request for Assistance line. This increase represents roughly a 150% increase in calls in SY 2016-17 as compared with SY 2015-16. In addition to the increased volume of calls through our RFA line, we significantly increased our interactions and contacts with families beyond our RFA line. In SY 2016-17, we interacted with more than 2000 individuals outside of our office walls through our outreach and deeper engagement within the community.

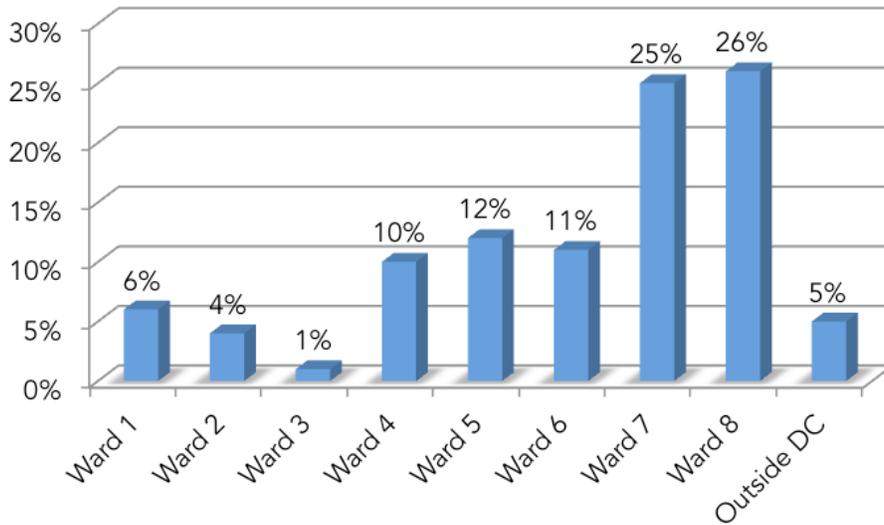
Requests for Assistance SY 2015-2016 and SY 2016-2017 Comparison

We more than doubled our RFAs from SY 2015-16 to SY 2016-17. This growth can be attributed to two factors – our ability to provide customer support in real time, by answering our RFA line live Monday through Fridays, and to an increased awareness of our office and services.



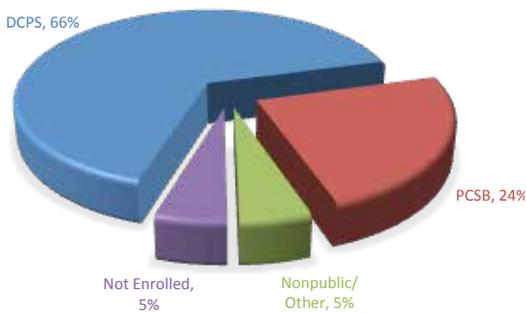
SY 2016-2017 RFAs by Ward

The majority of the RFAs to our office came from Wards 7 and 8, which have the largest number of school-aged children in the city. We believe that our increased presence in Wards 7 and 8 – as a result of our “Know Your Rights” special education workshops (in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8) and Ward 7 Parent Leadership Series – also fueled the increased number of RFAs from those wards.

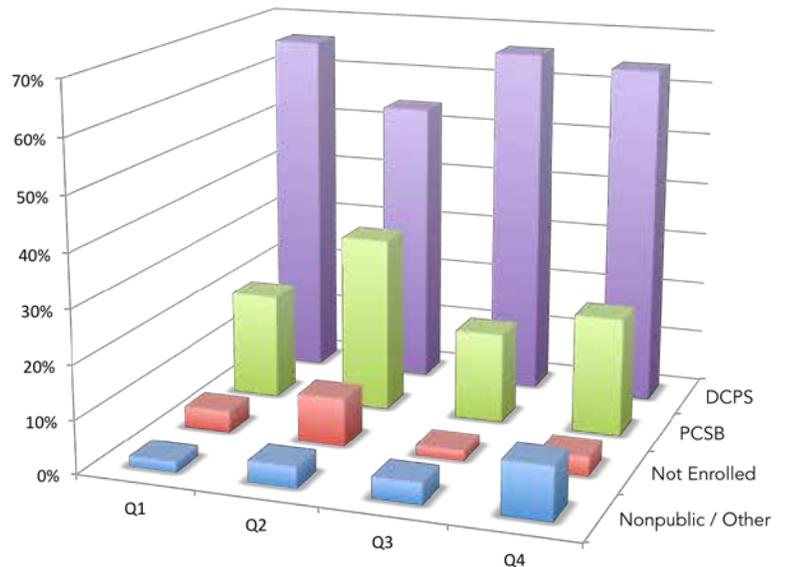


SY 2016-2017 RFAs by Sector

Roughly two-thirds 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 school officials, schools, and families in all 8 wards. Additionally, 67% of DCPS callers identified that the issue they were calling about was for a student who was at their in-boundary school, or school of right. While our interactions with public charter school families has also increased through our RFA process, we are continuing to identify better ways to reach and engage with public charter families and school leaders.



Requests for Assistance broken down by sector for school year 2016-17.

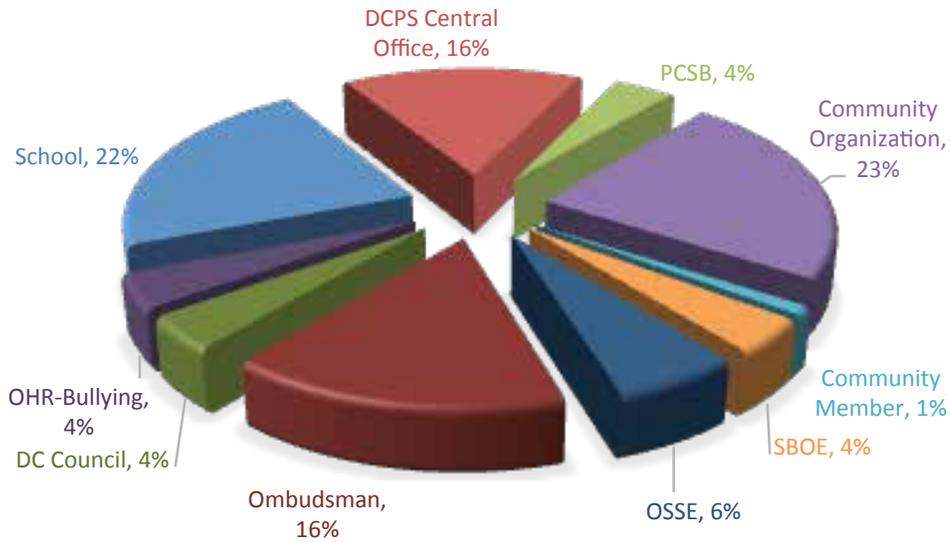


Requests for Assistance broken down by sector and by quarter for school year 2016-17.

SY 2016-2017 Referral Agencies

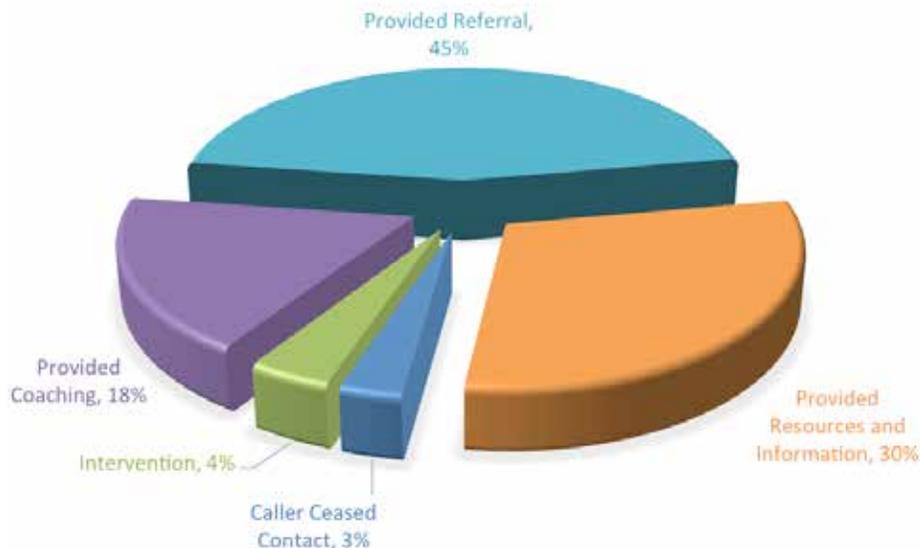
DCPS schools and DCPS' central office continue to be great partners with our office through their sharing of information regarding our office and the supports we provide to DCPS students, families, and schools.

In SY16-17 our office 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.



SY 2016-2017 RFA Resolutions

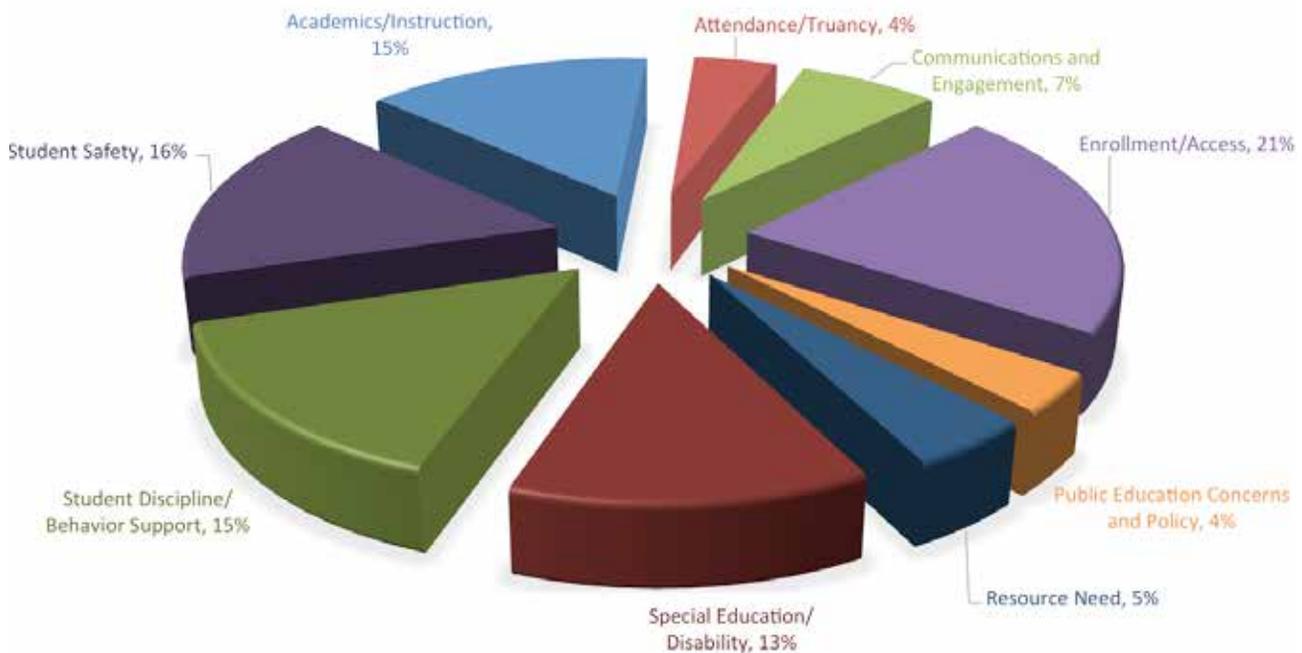
The majority of our resolutions entailed connecting families to resources, agencies, and organizations. This work, coupled with our resource guide and stakeholder engagement, allowed us to provide information to families in the moment. We also provided families with a significant amount of coaching, which supports and encourages self-advocacy in navigating the DC education landscape.



SY 2016-2017 Top RFA Issue Areas

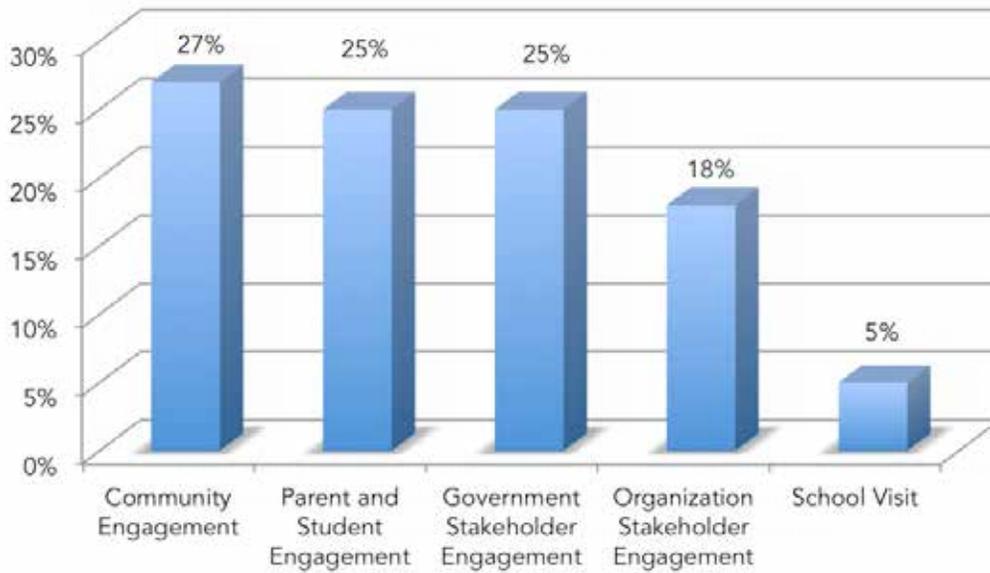
One of the top issue areas for our office in SY 2016-17 were inquiries regarding enrollment and access. Even with the development of the common lottery system, which simplified the process of applying to and enrolling in school, confusion still remained at various times of the school year for varying 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, but many families 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.

Enrollment and access concerns represented over 15% of all RFA inquiries made from in-boundary DCPS families. DCPS in-boundary parents also identified issues regarding discipline and student safety 40% of the time when contacting us with requests for assistance. This co-occurrence alludes to some of the underlying equity conversations on race and economic status echoed in dialogue around walkability. Additionally, 50% of public charter school parents identified discipline and safety as the reason for their RFA inquiry. Unlike DCPS families, public charter students and their families find themselves with substantially limited avenues of redress regarding discipline/student safety incidents in comparison to DCPS.



SY 2016-2017 Public Engagement Data

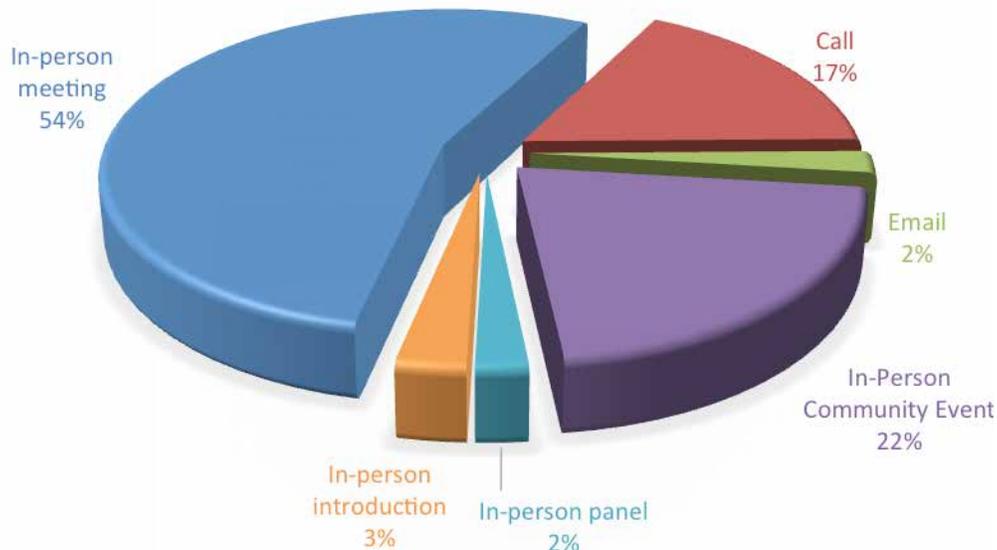
In addition to our RFA process, in SY 2016-17, our office (via one of our engagement and outreach modes) touched more than 2000 individuals.



SY 2016-2017 Public Engagement Mode

57% of our public engagement and outreach efforts involved interactions with families, communities, and individual schools. This level of engagement allowed our office to provide services that were directly tailored to the needs of schools and families.

43% of our engagement and outreach efforts focused on governmental, community-based, and organizational stakeholders. Our efforts to partner and collaborate with agencies and community-based organizations allowed us to expand our reach to more families. This balance of our work reinforced our ability to serve as liaisons between all stakeholders.





OBSERVATIONS AND EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

Section 4.1

OUTREACH & COLLABORATION

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 the development of partnerships and coalitions. In SY 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. Those listening tours were a vital component in establishing our office to directly meet the needs of students and families.

In SY 2016-17, we decided to deepen our community outreach, partnerships, and coalitions to meet families and communities in the trusted places where they show up. Our first step in doing this form of outreach was to answer our RFA line live Monday through Friday in an effort to meet the needs of families in real time. Secondly, we broadened our outreach to places and spaces where families show up for support. In addition to schools and education-focused organizations, we expanded our outreach to service providers, libraries, hospitals, recreation centers, child care centers, DC's Office of Unified Communications (DC 311), homeless family services, entities focused on community violence, organizations focused on working with non-English speaking communities, and local universities working with the families of school-age children.⁴⁶

The investment in our outreach and partnership expansion yielded great returns with a large increase in our ability to serve families via our RFA line and our increased physical presence within the community. Our SY 2016-17 outreach and partnership efforts have allowed our office to serve families in a more intentional and comprehensive way.

In SY 2016-17, our office worked to establish interagency relationships with the following agencies and offices:

- ▶ Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice
- ▶ DC Department of Parks & Recreation
- ▶ Mayor's Office of Community Relations & Services
- ▶ Office of the State Superintendent for Education
- ▶ Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
- ▶ DC Public Schools
- ▶ DC Public Charter School Board
- ▶ Office of Human Rights' Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program
- ▶ Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health & Human Services: Safer Stronger Initiative
- ▶ DC Public Libraries
- ▶ Office of Unified Communications

A longer list of our partnerships, engagements, and thought leadership can be found at the back of this report in Section VII: Stakeholder & Community Outreach (pages 36 & 37).

Section 4.2

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, COLLABORATION, & PARTNERSHIPS: TAPPING INTO THE EXPERTISE OF PARENTS & STUDENTS AS LEADERS

Our office strongly believes that families are the foundation upon which our communities are built. A quality public education system must have the ability to foster the voice and power of families. It is important for us to remember that the very ideals and principles of public education are tied to our nation's grounding in democracy and the "...fundamental principle of public participation in governance."^{47, 48} A common thread in the public education reform

movement has long been rooted in the “promise of bridging the gaps” between the home, the school, and the community through which families and communities engage in public education.⁴⁹ Dr. Joyce Epstein’s *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* well represents the relationship of co-dependence – shared between home, school, and community – on which a child’s academic success is grounded.⁵⁰ This narrative of co-dependency is reflected in the overall increase of interest in family and community engagement initiatives on the part of many school districts, LEAs, and state education agencies (SEAs). While we know an increase in family and community engagement initiatives possess the ability to foster an environment of equity and cultural responsiveness in schools, we also recognize the collaborative and partnership possibilities that can be nurtured.^{51, 52, 53} Conversely, we have also seen the barriers such initiatives can create for families if they are only developed from a deficit perspective of families and communities or consider families to be “objects for rehabilitation.”⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ Many early family engagement initiatives took the aforementioned approach only to realize families desired more than fixing. They wanted authentic interactions and opportunities for engagement, which included real connections to the academic success of their child and their community in the broader sense.⁵⁶

In reviewing our office data over the last two school years, we have noticed a high correlation between the issues families raise with our office and the limited, or lack of, family engagement and clear communication channels within their child’s school. While we understand schools are dealing with a myriad of issues on a daily basis, their ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with families is vital to the overall academic success of their students and to the sustainability of their school communities. Even in the midst of distrust, good faith steps can be taken in order to open the lines of communication with families. Open lines of communication can lead to a sense of transparency and have the ability to lead to the development of mechanisms to create meaningful engagement opportunities, which should capitalize on the expertise and interest of parents and families. Fostering an environment of community and transparency leads to the creation of shared norms, and increased clarity of roles and expectations between the school and families, both of which are building blocks for trust.⁵⁷

We agree that meaningful family engagement at the school level is vital, but opportunities for

parents at the citywide level are also critical. The inclusion of parent and student voices at the city level remains a top priority of our office, and we are committed to ensuring the voice of parents and students is embodied and reflected not only in our policy debates, but in the policy outcomes and implementations as well. Engaging families and communities in thoughtful decision-making develops trust and supports buy-in to sustainable policy solutions and reforms.⁵⁸

Creating a seat at the decision-making table for the voices of parents and students will require changing the current discourse in public education to a mindset inclusive of parents and students as vital “knowledgeable partners” who must be a part of the process.⁵⁹ This shifting of our relationships and mindsets with parents in a role of experts and “knowledgeable partners” requires inclusive interactions such as “meaningful consultation, collaboration, and shared responsibilities” at the school, district, and city level.⁶⁰ We cannot continue to shy away from the barriers of race, class, equity, and access, which continue to make meaningful interactions and relationships with families a challenge.¹⁵

Partnership with families cannot just be a one-way approach to advance the agendas of the school or the city at large. Recognizing the distance or lack of trust can make authentic engagement possible. A relational approach to the engagement of families can be made possible through the involvement of trusted entities or community-based organizations who can serve as intermediaries between schools, government officials, and families.^{61,62} Intermediaries, such as our office and other groups who offer direct supports to families, can help shift the dynamic of home-school and home-district interactions by bringing a holistic view of educational issues to the attention of families and interjecting various approaches to engagement “...across [various] settings, contexts, relationships, and levels, with the goals of mutual engagement, relationship building, and shared leadership and power.”⁶³ Our parent leadership work focuses on leveraging the “power of parents” and students, through increasing their knowledge of the system, while encouraging families to become active agents for transformation in their schools and the broader community.⁶⁴ We believe our work with parents extends the forms of power and increases their voice into conversations generally absent of parent or student input or participation.



PARENT LEADERSHIP SERIES

While issues of race disparities and other inequities show up in various ways in our community, in our schools we see the most prominent reflections. Family engagement, specifically the involvement of parents in and outside of school buildings, has long been thought of as a hallmark of academic success for students. Additionally, race and class also factor into the conversation of family engagement and to the perceptions and assumptions made about the quality of a school. What we have seen in our work, and what we know throughout history, is that engagement of families is not always equal. While we can find an abundance of parent organizations and modes of parent and community engagement in Ward 3 and perhaps Wards 2 and 6— which serve a significant number of white and more affluent students— in Ward 7 and 8, which are still majority African American and battling issues of poverty, the levels of parent engagement at schools and within communities is severely lacking.

One thing is clear; all parents care and want what is best for their child, their family, and their community. Socio-economic challenges, cultural perspectives, and educational experiences often play a huge role in the ways in which parents choose to or not to engage in their child's school. While some parents feel empowered to advocate fully on their child's behalf, other parents feel ill equip to undertake such a task.

In SY 2015-16 our office partnered with the Ward 7 Education Council, Ward 7 State Board of Education Member Karen Williams, and Ward 7 schools – both DCPS and public charter – to create a forum to support parent leadership and knowledge-building. In our first year of this work, we engaged in conversations throughout Ward 7 to better understand the needs of parents and their communities. We initially started our work focused on building parent capacity at the ward and school levels, primarily with parent organizations, but what we quickly realized was that families wanted more. In SY 2016-17, we continued our parent leadership work in Ward 7, and our sessions shifted from conversations regarding “How to Establish a Parent Organization” to conversations about how the city budget cycle and school budgets function, which led to sessions about advocacy at the school and city levels.⁶⁵ We hosted panel discussions with elected and appointed city government officials to discuss ways in which parents can be engaged and actively participate in decision-making outside of school buildings.⁶⁶ This series also provided parents with a forum for discussion across sector lines sparking conversation and collaboration, thus building community and capacity to support schools and communities in Ward 7.

The parent leadership work we started in Ward 7 led to the creation of our online Parent Leadership Toolkit. This online resource includes tools to support building parent capacity within schools, through parent organizations, and gives step-by-step advocacy supports to parents for their individual child or for work within their community. In addition to the tools focused on advocacy and capacity building, this resource also shares with parents, and other interested stakeholders, guides on how to understand the public education landscape in the District, budget tools to understand the city budget cycle and school

budgets, as well as a how to guide on how to navigate the public education system regarding supports and services. While our initial work was piloted in Ward 7, this tool will allow us to touch even more families and communities throughout the District.

Late in SY 2016-17, we partnered with Markus Batchelor, the Ward 8 State Board of Education member, to launch our parent work in Ward 8. In Ward 8 we are taking a different approach to initiating this work by starting off with focus group discussions with community-based organization, school leaders, parents, and other public education stakeholders. Our work in Ward 8 will take a more disaggregated approach in order to reach more families in the places they already trust and are showing up. Our approach will include hosting parent leadership sessions in partnership with a wider array of schools, community-based organizations, and services providers who work specifically in Ward 8. This approach is exciting for us as we know our reach into the Ward 8 community will be more impactful and support parents in a variety of ways. ■

The collaboration of all stakeholders in the DC public education system is essential to creating a more efficient and equitable system for all families. It is necessary to create a space that allows parents and students to voice their thoughts and concerns about the public education system at large. In an effort to create more space at the decision making table for students and parents, in SY 2017-18 our office will establish a Parent & Student Advisory Committee to provide an outlet for parents and students to assist and guide our office's ability to serve families more intentionally throughout the District and to foster conversations and uncover solutions about the issues all stakeholders face within the District's public education landscape. More about this advisory committee can be found on our office's website.

Section 4.3

DISCIPLINE

Student discipline serves as one of the primary methods for maintaining safe learning environments in an effort to give students access to a quality educational experience. In theory, student discipline responds to both the needs of the individual student and the needs of the school community. In practice, the emphasis on harsh, punitive disciplinary measures neither fosters learning outcomes nor improves school safety.⁶⁷ While discipline tends to have a negative connotation, effective student discipline can both prevent misbehavior and promote positive school climate.^{68, 69}

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education published "*Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*," a non-regulatory guidance with three focus areas and principles to keep students engaged and in school:

1. **Climate and Prevention:** Schools that foster positive school climates can help to engage all students in learning by preventing problem behaviors and intervening effectively to support struggling and at-risk students.
2. **Expectations and Consequences:** Schools that have discipline policies or codes of conduct with clear, appropriate, and consistently applied expectations and consequences will help students improve behavior, increase engagement, and boost achievement.
3. **Equity and Continuous Improvement:** Schools that build staff capacity and continuously evaluate the school's discipline policies and practices are more likely to ensure fairness and equity and promote achievement for all students.⁶⁸

We know that parents and families are invaluable assets when it comes to monitoring, supporting, and advocating for their students, especially when it concerns the impact of discipline policies. For the past two school years, student discipline has continued to trend as one of the top issues raised when assisting parents and families. Student discipline inquiries accounted for roughly 15% of RFAs in SY 2016-17. From SY 2015-16 to SY 2016-17, the amount of RFAs we received regarding student discipline/behavior support more than doubled. While comparing this yearlong data, we questioned the state of student discipline to spark such an increase. Student behavior and discipline are challenges in their own right, but they are often times indicative of students' unmet needs elsewhere— academic struggles, undiagnosed or underserved disabilities, and family/home difficulties.⁷⁰ Although the percentage is relatively low, the correlation between issues of discipline and special education, truancy, communication, and even enrollment is high. Our office has received requests ranging from parents being unaware their child's IEP included a behavior intervention plan to parents frustrated due to un-communicated disciplinary issues that resulted in their child being uninvited from a school.⁷¹

Our city's public education landscape is complex and evidence of this complexity is present in school discipline policies throughout the District. Within the two sectors, DCPS and public charter schools, there are more than 60 LEAs, or individual school districts in DC; each has its own set of policies and procedures. Additionally, the differing terminology and policies are a challenge for families, who do not normally think about discipline policies until an issue arises. Many families are unaware that each LEA is governed by a different discipline policy. If they do understand the differences from LEA to LEA, they are not always sure where to find the policy, which explains the bulk of discipline requests made to our office. For example, one parent mentioned ongoing disciplinary issues that her child had at school. Many incidents that her son was being disciplined for were categorized as "disrespect", a behavior that she did not know warranted disciplinary action because of the subjectivity of the term. These interactions with the school resulted in her feeling as though her son was being targeted by unfair discipline policies left to the discretion of the school.

Through our communication with families, we discovered that students and parents lack clarity regarding student discipline policies that govern the diversity of LEAs and the schools they operate. More frequently, parents expressed that they received very little communication regarding disciplinary procedure and infrequent documentation supporting the school's decision(s) concerning consequences for student behavior. As partners in the discipline process, parents and schools should maintain regular communication about aspects of a child's learning.⁶⁹ With the District's diverse set of LEAs, parents and students are unclear on DCPS' Chapter 25 and the different policies throughout individual charter LEAs. Chapter 25 established revised student discipline rules for all DC public schools to ensure that disciplinary measures are as "objective and measured as possible."⁷² DC's Public Charter School Board (PCSB) does not "dictate the specific course of action in school discipline plans," which means there is no singular disciplinary guidance for the charter schools it oversees.⁷³ This poses difficulty for parents who are trying to understand their child's school's discipline responses.

On the Macro-Level: Our Citywide Work and Focus on Students

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE) Equity Reports⁷⁴ provide transparency of information gathered from all DC public schools – both DCPS and public charter schools – each school year. With data compiled from individual schools, these reports are intended to highlight discrepancies, and disparities, within the quality of public education in regard to race, ethnicity, economic status, special education status, or other factors. These reports are intended to ensure fairness by evaluating the impact of school policies. The discipline section, which details the percentage of students suspended, illustrates the disproportionate suspension rate of economically disadvantaged students, special education students, and students of color.⁷⁴ In addition to examining data compiled by OSSE, schools should commit to more frequent evaluation of discipline policies to ensure fair and appropriate application of said policies and to avoid disproportionately impacting certain groups of students.⁶⁹ The Equity Reports, along with school and state report cards,⁷⁵ are useful tools, but unfortunately the family and community awareness of these documents is lacking.

In June 2016, OSSE released non-regulatory LEA discipline guidance in order to:

- ▶ "...assist LEAs in meeting their obligations with federal and local laws and regulations regarding administration of student discipline."

- ▶ "...ensure that all students are provided with equal access to educational opportunities... [and] to avoid student discipline policies that have a disproportionate impact on particular groups of students and instead create learning environments that will allow students to thrive."
- ▶ "...provides LEAs...with an overview of federal and local laws that affect school discipline key frameworks for understanding and addressing behavior, recommended practices, and a range of local and national resources."⁷⁶

Gearing OSSE's discipline guidance towards helping parents understand how charter LEA and DCPS discipline policies and policy implementation differ would be extremely valuable for families. This tool would aid parents in school selections and ensure that families are made aware of variations in LEA discipline policies.



Evidence of Our Work

LEA DISCIPLINE POLICY ANALYSIS

Understanding the variations within discipline, our office conducted a comparative analysis of student discipline policies for DCPS and each of the public charter LEAs in partnership with Council for Court Excellence (CCE) during SY 2015-16. The initial purpose of this analysis was to aid our understanding of the various discipline policies as we support families in this area. We quickly realized that there was a void of resources for families regarding discipline. Through the development of resource tools for families to support their school selection and transition processes, it is our hope to utilize analysis to support families in their proactive and reactive needs regarding school discipline policies.

Our findings further support our claim that students and families need clear disciplinary policies that contain predictable outcomes and are also able to accommodate the uniqueness of every student. Prescriptive policies often times rely too heavily on exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion) and fail to improve school climate.⁷⁷ The creation of policies that are clear and consistent but also meeting the needs of all students is a difficult one; however, this is not a burden for the school alone to bear. Schools may not always have the capacity to effectively implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline. This reinforces the need for more stakeholders to be involved in the process of forming and implementing discipline policy changes.

In addition to comparing the policies, we also realized how valuable it was to have access to discipline policies for all schools throughout the city. Having an inventory of the discipline policies has helped us become more knowledgeable and allowed us to serve families quicker. In SY 2016-17, we worked to support families by examining variations in discipline policies. Our office found that even gaining access to specific LEA policies was a barrier. Information that should be easily accessible to parents and families was not, which caused additional burdens for families without resources they need to effectively advocate on their student's behalf. For example, numerous parents expressed that they did not have a copy of the policy or they were unable to locate one online. Those who did have the student handbook had trouble finding specific information about discipline procedures beyond exclusionary responses. As

we collected school handbooks, we noticed varying availability from LEA to LEA. For example, one charter school's policy was available on the school's website; another's was available online but it was two school years old; and another policy was only available at the school site. While examining policies, we also could not help but note the lack of guidance given in interpreting them. Subjective terms like "disrespect" and "defiant behavior" used in discipline policies do not provide the clarity required when implementing policies that can affect a student's academic achievement and overall attitude about school.⁷⁸

This lack of clarity inconveniences parents as they work to choose the right school option to meet their children's needs. Inconsistency between schools' discipline policies only creates more confusion as parents try to make the best decisions for their students. Many parents do not understand the difference between policies and where to find them. As parents move to the charter system, it is not always clear that DCPS discipline policy does not apply to charter schools. In order to continue meeting the needs of families and students regarding variations in discipline policies, we will continue this comparative analysis of updated school discipline policies in conjunction with Howard University School of Law for the 2017-18 school year.* ■

**Howard University School of Law Education Rights Center and students in the School Discipline seminar taught by e. christi cunningham: Marcha Chaudry, Ryvell D. Fitzpatrick, Nicola Forbes, Yolanda A. Long, and Whitney N. Shirley.*

Further Observations

Even with reports regarding school discipline within the District, policy guidance from OSSE, and extensive analysis of discipline policies across LEAs, there is still a void. Creating more clarity around discipline processes is necessary in order to help parents understand how differences in approach can impact their children. Also, developing a centralized source of discipline policy guidance, geared towards parents and their concerns, will provide parents additional information to make the right decision for their children. It is essential for schools to create more clarity around discipline policy as it affects their students and students' families. This requires extended effort beyond making handbooks available online. Schools offering additional guidance to parents about discipline would also strengthen communication, foster positive relationships, and improve school culture.⁷⁹

Our collaborative work with CCE highlighted the absence of parent and student voice in the process of policy development. We acknowledge that LEAs do their best to follow guidance and best practices in the creation of their policies. However, the lack of parent and student voice in discipline policy construction and evaluation results in "one size fits all" behavior plans that address the student and not the behavior. This overreliance on harsh punishment like exclusionary discipline and the lack of restorative justice prioritizes compliance instead of learning. These harsh practices have a devastating impact on students of color and students with disabilities who have an increased likelihood of future disciplinary problems and a higher probability of coming in contact with the juvenile justice system.⁷⁷ This type of push-out is fueled by policing and criminalization that denies students access to equal educational opportunity.

We attribute this disconnect of student discipline theory and practice to reactionary responses to discipline issues. Unlike truancy/attendance and special education in the district, student discipline does not have uniform regulations that guide the construction of policy. Instead, student discipline policies are created in a vacuum, limiting the input from the stakeholders most affected — students and parents. This does not have to be the case. By inviting parents and families in as equal partners in education, collaboration is prioritized, lines of communication are opened, and student achievement becomes a shared responsibility.⁷⁹ Once these policies are created and implemented, there should be opportunities for regular check-in and evaluation with students and families. Families, as supporters of learning, "should be involved in the development and review of the school's discipline policy" by working in conjunction with students and schools to identify goals for school climate as they align to academic goals.⁶⁹

Finding What Works

BODY	AGENCY	LAW	STAKEHOLDERS	PURPOSE/GOALS	WHAT THEY DO
Advisory Council on Student Behavior and Discipline (2016)	Louisiana, Department of Education	Louisiana Act 522 ⁸⁰ - established an advisory council on student discipline and behavior policies	administrators, teachers, parents, resource representatives	To provide guidance to the Department of Education regarding best practices for school discipline; goals include examining disproportionality of discipline, PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), and restorative approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> working groups to discuss integrity of data reviews discipline policies at the state level
Code of Conduct Advisory Council (2010)	Massachusetts, Boston Public Schools (BPS)	Chapter 222 ⁸¹ - intended to limit the use of long-term suspension as a consequence for student misconduct until other consequences have been considered and tried as appropriate	administrators, teachers, parents, students, community partners, resource representatives	To advise superintendent and school committee; to review code of conduct and make recommendations; to evaluate implementation; to promote alternatives to school exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> created a new BPS code of conduct secured a federal grant for restorative justice personnel throughout the district
Discipline Equity/ Advisory Task Force (2013)	Illinois, Champaign School District	Illinois Senate Bill 100 ⁸² -eliminated automatic "zero tolerance" suspensions and expulsions, and requires that schools exhaust all other means of intervention before expelling students or suspending them for more than three days	administrators, teachers, school board members	To act as an advisory to reduce unwarranted racial disparities in school discipline and revise school code of conduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> revises code of conduct

In addition to the advisory councils and boards mentioned above, the District already has similar structures in place that could easily be adapted for discipline. For the past ten years, The State Advisory Panel for Special Education (SAP)⁸³ has worked on issues relevant to services provided to students with IEPs and disabilities. SAP currently exists to advise OSSE and its Division of Specialized Education on unmet needs of students with disabilities. This body enables OSSE to seek meaningful input from all stakeholders, from parents and administrators to community partners and service providers.

Finding a Solution

While disciplinary issues are not a problem easily solved, it needs to include the voices of all impacted stakeholders. From policy formation to implementation to evaluation, both students and parents should have the authority to review LEA discipline policies, provide recommendations, and promote alternatives to school exclusion. Students and parents are an invaluable asset when constructing discipline policies because they offer proximity in a way that policymakers do not. This collaborative approach would lead to increased buy-in for discipline policies, and schools would be more likely to determine the causes of student misbehavior with student and parent voice incorporated in the development of policy. With student and parent insight, schools would have a greater opportunity to discuss positive behavioral skills and desired long-term outcomes for students in conjunction with those most affected by discipline policies.

A more inclusive discipline policy development process would also reduce the amount of discretion left at the hands of staff and administrators. Without the rigid adherence to overly punitive discipline policies, administrators are able to determine how to best address student behavior in a restorative manner. However, vague and uncertain understandings of discipline policies result in inequitable discipline responses at the school level.

To further improve discipline in the District, our office offers the recommendation for the formation of a parent and student discipline advisory board⁸⁴ that would be proactive rather than reactive. Along with having these advisory groups at the school level, a parent and student advisory specifically for student discipline would be valuable for all public schools across D.C. As the agency that sets statewide policies, provides supports, and exercises accountability for public education, OSSE would be the best place for this type of body.

Section 4.4

OTHER PUBLIC EDUCATION CONCERNS

Special Education

In the District, approximately 12,000 students, or roughly 14% of the total enrollment of students in DCPS and public charter schools, received special education services.^{85, 86} In recent years, the District has continued to trend close to or slightly above the national average of school-aged children with disabilities at 13%. While the District continues to work toward service delivery improvements, conversations regarding the overrepresentation of certain subgroups, such as African Americans, and the lack of comprehensive and equitable services citywide persist.

Students with IEPs⁸⁶

Year(s): 3 selected | School Type: All | Type: Number

Data Provided by: DC Action for Children

Location	School Type	Data Type	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
District of Columbia	DCPS	Number	8,010	6,672	7,360
	Other/Contracted	Number	0	0	0
	Public Charter	Number	4,898	4,740	4,898
	Total	Number	12,908	11,412	12,258

Considering the percentage of school-aged children receiving special education services, it is no surprise that RFA inquires regarding issues of special education accounted for 13% of all RFAs in SY 2016-17. While this percentage is slightly down from the number of RFAs inquires reported to our office in SY 2015-16, we continue to see a high correlation between issues of special education and other inquiry areas such as student discipline, student safety, and enrollment and access.

Although the IEP process for special education services is fairly streamlined through standardized processes that LEAs must follow, there is a lack of understanding of the process from the perspective of parents and students. Calls to our RFA line range from: (1) parents confused about the IEP process; (2) parents who are upset and frustrated due to a lack of services for their child; (3) parents or guardians who lack clarity regarding their rights and how to activate those rights; and (4) parents who have noticed issues with their child (i.e discipline or academic issues) and are trying to navigate next steps, perhaps an evaluation, but do not know where to get advice or guidance.

As a resource, our office works to fill the void by assisting families through one-on-one coaching and by connecting them to services throughout the city that can support their individual needs.

In the District we are fortunate to have several government and community-based entities working to support the needs of families regarding special education. Even with the countless organizations working in this space, the need for additional supports is great. On a regular basis families call our office in search of an 'advocate' to hold their hand through the process. While such services exist in the District, the number of 'advocates' is limited. In addition to the limited services provided through direct advocacy for families, the lack of coordination and collaboration of such entities is an additional barrier for families to overcome.

The challenges that students and families experience when it comes to special education rarely occurs in silos and almost always require a varied approach to a solution. Cross-sector and intergovernmental collaborations and partnerships are vital – allowing for an increase in capacity and a deeper reach into the community in an effort to serve families and students dealing with disabilities more comprehensively.

Attendance & Truancy

In SY 2016-17, only 4% of RFA inquiries dealt primarily with issues of attendance or truancy. We have noticed a significant lack of understanding regarding the citywide policies on attendance and truancy. Even with a low percentage of RFAs in this area, our office has noticed a high correlation between issues regarding attendance and truancy and other issues, such as enrollment and access, that families share with our office. In SY 2017-18, our office is planning to focus more of our efforts in this area in order to support the needs of students and families and to work bring awareness to this issue area.

English Language Learners Parental Engagement

As the non-English and limited-English speaking population in our city continues to grow, it is vital to find ways to meaningfully connect with the diverse communities within our city. By law, our city has language access requirements⁸⁷ designed to facilitate in the engagement of all communities, but unfortunately this mandate is unfunded and thus unevenly fulfilled throughout the city. Many non-

English or limited-English speaking residents feel disconnected from access to services and lack the ability to have full participation in decision-making processes.

In our office, it is our desire to serve all families in the city. In SY 2016-17, we translated the majority of our materials into the six required languages – Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and French. Additionally, we use translation services through Language Line Services, Inc. to engage in phone conversations with non-English speaking families when they reach out to our office. While the aforementioned efforts are a few good faith steps, we realize the needs that still exist within many of our communities. Late in SY 2016-17, our office worked to partner with community-based organization that work with families in many of the non-English speaking communities to make greater connections with those families via organizations they trust. This is a vital step because we know not all families are literate at the same levels and we want to make connections with our non-English and limited-English speaking families beyond just the translated words in our materials. In SY 2017-18, we will continue to find more innovative ways to partner with government entities and community-based organizations in order to serve all families well, regardless of their primary language. In October 2017 we kicked off this effort through an advertising campaign on Metro buses in a variety of other languages in order to reach more families and make them aware of the supports and services our office provides.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & PARTNERSHIP

In order to ensure more equitable outcomes for students throughout the District, parent and student voice must be at the forefront of our public education system. The voices of families and communities must be amplified throughout the policymaking process. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Design a framework for the regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education and the policy development decision-making processes. Make the authentic engagement of families and communities a mandatory part of the policy process and find room for their voices at the decision-making table.
2. As partners, parents and schools should maintain regular communication about all aspects of a child's learning. Schools should work to create an environment that is welcoming to parents and students. Establishing such an environment signals to families that they are valued and provides a forum for open communication and a feeling of mutual respect.

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 offer the following recommendations:

1. Equity reports are a useful tool. There needs to be an increased focus on ensuring that families and students know about their existence and usefulness.
2. Schools should go over discipline policies during the beginning of the school year and also provide information on appeals and alternatives to suspension.
3. Schools should ensure that parents have physical copies of discipline policies and be able to locate them online.
4. 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.
5. 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.

6. The development of regulatory guidance for student discipline policies and procedures, applicable to all LEAs, to be developed by our state education agency (OSSE).
7. The lack of comprehensive alternative instruction policies to support the academic achievement needs of students while out of school for disciplinary reasons is alarming. In order to ensure policies that are student-focused in nature, it is vital that we continue to move in the direction of developing and implementing best practices for alternative instruction (i.e. offsite tutoring) that support the academic and social-emotional needs of students.

OTHER PUBLIC EDUCATION CONCERNS

In understanding the complexities of the public education system, we must find ways to eliminate barriers and increase access for families. Demystifying systems and processes that contribute to barriers in engagement requires greater access to more comprehensive information across the system. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

SPECIAL EDUCATION/MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS & RESOURCES

1. A need remains for a resource to support parents who have children with disabilities during the school selection and enrollment process. This resource would be useful in assisting families in school selection and transition. Using a collaborative approach to the creation of this document would give families the full universe of resources and organizational supports. Enlisting the support of organizations that focus in this area would be ideal.
2. Developing more collaborative partnerships to educate parents and students on their rights is vital. The special education process is extremely nuanced, complex, and challenging to navigate alone. Several partners already exist, but the expansion of these partnerships would ensure that no family or student slips through the cracks and would also provide more comprehensive services for our students.
3. 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),⁸⁸ support families in understanding the myriad of resources and services geared toward fostering self-reliance and recovery for students and their families.

ATTENDANCE & TRUANCY

1. Attendance and truancy policies are one of the few streamlined policies we have in the city which apply directly to both DCPS and public charters. LEAs should engage in conversation with families and students regarding attendance and truancy policies regularly in order to discuss the details of the policies, familiarize families with the consequences associated with policy non-compliance, orient families to common terminology used in the policies, and address any questions or areas of concern families have regarding the policies.
2. Citywide attendance/truancy campaigns, such as "Every Day Counts!," must promote a real sense of campaign awareness within schools and communities in order to create familiarity of programmatic goals and to ensure the buy-in of the communities the campaigns are designed to target.
3. Resources on the LEA and citywide levels regarding attendance and truancy need to be continuously pushed downward to the school level for families to process and understand. Resources such as attendance.dc.gov,⁸⁹ OSSE's attendance and truancy resources for parents,⁹⁰ and LEA specific

attendance/truancy resources are vital tools for families in understanding the laws and policies governing attendance and truancy. Additionally, the aforementioned resources also provide families with service supports, if necessary.

HOMELESSNESS

1. Families experiencing homelessness are not fully informed about the legal protections and available resources for homeless students and their families. This valuable information clarifies so much for families experiencing homelessness and keeps students from missing precious classroom time and instruction due to a lack of information. LEAs should share resources regarding issues of homelessness and related services to families on an annual basis, regardless of need, to ensure that all families are aware and have access to these vital resources and contacts if necessary.
2. Such resources should include: 1) OSSE's "Education of Homeless Children & Youth Program" resources;⁹¹ 2) any LEA/school contact or homeless liaisons and resource supports;⁹² and 3) details regarding the McKinney-Vento Act, legal rights, and protections.



SECTION V

MOVING FORWARD

Over the course of the last two school years it has been a true honor to serve families and all education stakeholders in the District of Columbia. During our years of operation we have served roughly 2,500 families and stakeholders in navigating the complexities of the education landscape through our RFA process and through our presence within our diverse communities. Working collaboratively with a variety of partners, both government and community-based entities, has allowed our office to support all our families, from our most vulnerable families to the more affluent families, in the ways they need assistance the most. In SY 2017-18 and beyond, we look forward to continuing to serve families and students in more direct, innovative, and collaborative ways. We welcome your partnership in making this work possible.



Notes

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STAKEHOLDER & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The Chief Student Advocate engages in other education policy discussions through membership on the follow task forces, advisory committees, working groups, panels, and conference participation:

- » Member, National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)
- » Every Day Counts! (Truancy) Task Force, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
- » Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
- » Member, DC STEM Network Advisory Council, Carnegie Institute for Science
- » School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
- » The Institute for Educational Leadership's National Family & Community Engagement Conference (2016)
- » Member, DC Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) Advisory Group, Multicultural Community Service (MCS)
- » Panelist for Education Pioneers panel discussion: Why parental involvement matters?
- » Panelist for Teach for America's panel discussion: The Power of Parent, Student & Community Voice in Education
- » Panelist for Institute for Educational Leadership DC Education Policy Fellowship Program: Policymaking and the Legislative Process
- » Panelist for Engaging Fathers and Families in Education, U.S. Department of Education
- » Panelist for Education Forum, Mayor's Office on African Affairs & Commission on African Affairs
- » ESSA Task Force – State Report Card, State Board of Education
- » Presenter for Family and Community Engagement Professional Learning Community, Parents Amplifying Voices in Education
- » Presenter for Mind the Gap: Getting to Solutions for Students with Challenging Behaviors

A snapshot of our SY 2016-2017 stakeholder and community outreach includes:

- » OSSE's State Advisory Panel on Special Education
- » Senior High Alliance of Parents Principals and Educators (S.H.A.P.P.E)
- » Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization
- » Coalition for DC Public Schools & Communities (C4DC)
- » Carlos Rosario Education Fair
- » Raise DC
- » Teaching 4 Change
- » Community of Hope
- » Georgetown University Institute of College Preparedness
- » DC School Reform Now
- » Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
- » The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
- » District of Columbia Association for Special Education's Advocacy Forum
- » DC Fiscal Policy Institute
- » Flamboyant Foundation
- » Howard University School of Law
- » Leadership for Educational Equity
- » DC Action for Children



STAKEHOLDER & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- » Daybreak Ministries
- » OSSE's Re-Engagement Center
- » Fellowship for Race & Equity in Education
- » Office of Specialized Instruction, DC Public Schools
- » Douglass Knoll Community Center
- » EDFest
- » OCASE Foundation Backpack School Supply Giveaway
- » DC Alliance for Youth Advocates (DCAYA)
- » Edgewood Brookland Family Support Collaborative
- » DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative
- » East Of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative
- » Collaborative Solutions for Communities
- » Far Southeast Family Collaborative
- » 21st Century School Fund
- » Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs
- » Mayor's Office on African Affairs
- » Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)
- » Ward 2 Education Network
- » Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs
- » Advisory Neighborhood Commission 7B
- » We Act Radio's The Education Town Hall
- » Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative
- » Office of Family and Public Engagement, DC Public Schools
- » Division of Specialized Instruction, DC Public Schools
- » DC Public Charter School Board
- » Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
- » Office of Student Wellness, DC Public Schools
- » DC Department of Parks & Recreation
- » Mayor's Office of Community Relations & Services
- » Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
- » Council for Court Excellence (CCE)
- » Family Voices of Washington DC
- » Man the Block, Richard Wright Public Charter Schools
- » OSSE's Division of Health & Wellness
- » Advocates for Justice in Education (AJE)
- » School Talk
- » Children's Law Center
- » Ward Five Council on Education
- » Ward 8 Council on Education
- » Ward 7 Education Council
- » Ward 4 Education Alliance
- » District of Columbia Special Education Cooperative
- » OSSE's Office of Dispute Resolution
- » My School DC
- » FOCUS Data Summit
- » DC Special Education Cooperative Job Fair
- » Education Forward, DC Public Education Engagement Brainstorming Session
- » Atlantic Education Summit
- » DCAYA Advocate for Action Summit
- » Ward 3 Education Network
- » Ward 4 Education Alliance: 2017 Neighborhood School Fair
- » DCPS Youth & Family Resource Fair





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