

Fiscal Year 2015 Performance Oversight Hearing

Council of the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
Chairman David Grosso

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Official Testimony of
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Office of the Student Advocate
District of Columbia State Board of Education

Introduction

Good Morning Chairman Grosso and to all of the members of the Committee on Education. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to serve in the role of the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia and lead the Office of the Student Advocate, an independent office housed within the DC State Board of Education. The Office of the Student Advocate was officially established in May 2015 and I am pleased to join you today to share the great work that has been undertaken by our office over the last nine and a half months. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. The Student and Parent Empowerment Act of 2013 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 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, serve as an advocate for students in conflict resolution proceedings before the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education;
- Sixth**, to track trends, questions, and concerns presented to the office and their resolution;
- And lastly**, to recommend policy changes and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services.

The legislative vision set for our office was the foundation upon which we began the work of our office. Over the last nine and a half months, I have worked diligently to make our legislative mandate operational. This work has been an entrepreneurial venture of great proportions because while the vision of the office is innovative and vital

in nature, an office, within a government structure, such as ours does not exist in this form anywhere else. Getting the office up, running, and operational required getting the input and buy-in of the very stakeholders that our office was established to serve. This process required months of preparation and over 100 meetings, which included in-person meetings with a variety of public education stakeholders and communities, numerous brainstorming sessions, and significant coalition building.

Mission

The mission of the Office of the Student Advocate is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. In our work, we provide step-by-step assistance for students, parents, families, and community members to **Be Informed, Be Connected, and Be Empowered**. We guide and support students, parents, families, and community members in navigating the public school system in DC. Our role is an essential one because as we know, despite the best of intentions, the public education landscape is extremely complex; and the very uniqueness of our public education system is both an opportunity and a barrier.

This work thus requires a multipronged approach to ensure that community members' voices are heard throughout the District. This work takes form in 5 ways – in our **individual coaching, leadership training and workshops for students and families, resource development, coalition building with government, community, and organization stakeholders, and policy-level advocacy through coalitions and taskforces**.

Individual Work with Families

Since my appointment to this role in May 2015, I have worked in a capacity that has uncovered both the wonderful opportunities and services for students and their families to access as well as the challenges and hurdles that families face in our public education system. To that end our office has guided, supported, and empowered over 100 students and families in a way that give them the ability to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. The bulk of this

work included coaching and providing appropriate resources (43%), connecting families to relevant stakeholders (14%) and in some cases, acting as a voice for the parent through direct intervention (11%). For example, one parent who had difficulty obtaining an IEP evaluation for her child for several months reached out to our office for assistance. We advised her of her rights regarding special education and coached her through effective communication with the school to help ensure her needs were heard. As a result, after an entire school year of not being heard, the school finally agreed to conduct an evaluation. A teacher later requested that this mom, who was previously unsuccessful in getting her needs heard, support other parents in advocating for their rights. In another instance, we worked with a family to not only help them obtain a 504 plan for their child with a severe food allergy, but also supported the school in implementing a food safety plan for the entire school, meaning that the support of this one child had benefits extending to hundreds of children.

This individual level work is possible through our operation of a public education hotline which accepts “Requests for Assistance” from students, parents, families, and community members to answer questions and provide information about public education and to refer individuals who contact our office to the appropriate agencies, offices, and organizations within the District that can meet their specific needs.

Requests for Assistance can also be submitted online via our webpage. This is a mechanism through which we provide one-on-one coaching to students, parents, and families on a variety of public education issues. Our work with students and parents allows us to connect the ‘Requests for Assistance’ that our office is seeing to additional trainings and resources that work to tackle systemic issues and remove barriers for students and families to ensure that there is equal access to a quality public education.

Leadership training and workshops for students and families

Empowering students, parents, and families to be their own best advocates is a primary focus of the office. To further support such student and parent leadership, our office has developed a variety of targeted trainings, information sessions, and workshops to help empower families. For instance, our office has developed a framework for a seven-week

training program, the Volunteer Advocate Program, for students, parents, families, or any education stakeholder that can equip them to be education advocates in their own schools and communities. This program is still in the preliminary planning and partnership phases and will not be launched until later in 2016.

Our office has also worked to develop an in person informational session and workshop on special education issues and advocacy. This discussion is made possible through intergovernmental and community-based organization collaborations. This first panel discussion was a “Know Your Rights” special education discussion, which included panelists from the Children’s Law Center, Advocates for Justice and Education, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, Family Voices of DC, and special education parent advocates. The first panel discussion occurred in Ward 8 in November 2015 and was co-hosted with the Ward 8 State Board of Education representative, and upon request, I am currently organizing repeat of this panel in other wards. On Thursday, March 10th, our office – in partnership with the organizations listed above as well as the Ward 4 Education Alliance – will host this panel discussion in Ward 4. For the upcoming panel discussions we will be working more closely with OSSE and their special education parent advisory committee. Future panel discussions will also include a panel of parent experts and professionals.

Resource Development

In addition to our trainings and workshops, we have also developed materials and resources that are accessible any time as a part of our online portal. One of the primary functions outlined in the legislative mandate for the office was the creation and operation of Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters regarding public education. Meeting this legislative mandate and statutory requirement is impossible with the current lack of staffing capacity in the Office of the Student Advocate. In an effort to attempt to fill this void and meet the statutory requirement, the Education and Community Resource Guide was developed and launched on the Office of the Student Advocate webpage. I am particularly proud of

our online Education and Community Resource Guide, which can be found on our page of the State Board of Education website (<http://sboe.dc.gov/page/resource>). This online resource guide is the first city-wide initiative of its kind – this guide is a continuously evolving resource that currently has over 350 resource listings, which are organized in 30 categories. The guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all 8 wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide was developed to highlight organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical and much needed services to residents across the District of Columbia. This resource guide not only assists our office in fulfilling our mission but also gives anyone who uses it the ability to gain access to a plethora of resources, agencies, and organizations that are focused on, and impact, education and educational attainment, while recognizing the work that is already being done by hundreds of organizations. The entire guide is updated on a quarterly basis but in an effort to ensure that all relevant and useful resources are available to anyone who accesses the guide, we have created a supplemental document, which is updated on a weekly basis, with any new resources that have been brought to our awareness.

We have also developed several resource tip sheets on topics that provide support to students and their families in all aspects of the education and achievement. A wide variety of resources can be found on our web page. The resources on our webpage include: effective communication skills for interacting with your child's school; fostering effective working relationships with your child's school and teacher; managing conflict through effective communication; a know your rights special education and advocacy slide presentation; a slide presentation on understanding the difference between a 504 plan and an IEP; questions to ask for parent/teacher meetings; and District of Columbia public education governance structure map.

Finally, we are working to translate our brochures into multiple languages, so that language isn't a barrier in accessing our services. Although language access is a priority

we currently lack sufficient funding to reach communities that do not speak English as a first language. This is extremely problematic.

Coalition building with government, community, and organization stakeholders

The partnerships that we have nurtured with community-based and civic organizations, in addition to the intergovernmental collaborations that we have forged with other DC government agencies, is a positive force in making the work of our office possible in the absence of sufficient capacity within our office. Our partnerships also enable us to reach more families who need our support. Our partnership with My School DC, for example, and other like organizations, has allowed us to assist families in the school enrollment process for students who are eligible for enrollment in public schools in DC. As a part of this process we are able to provide families with information on not only school enrollment, the school lottery application, and admissions process but also guidance on school options and appropriate school fit for students and their families, and overall questions on school choice.

As a direct result of our office's engagement of stakeholders, relationship building, and resource sharing, our office consistently receives referrals from Councilmembers, State Board members, the Ombudsman Office, the Chancellor's Office, DCPS Instructional Superintendents, DC Public Charter School Board, educators and school administrators, as well as other community based organizations.

To ensure that our office reaches as many families as possible, we have reached out to every DCPS principal and have met with 17 schools to date, in order to communicate how our office can serve their families and partner with them. Are currently in the process of reaching out to all of the charter LEAs as well. This is our second round of outreach to our public schools.

Additionally, we have distributed our brochures in English to a variety of high traffic areas in the city, such as all of our public libraries and several schools. We are in the process of working to also distribute our brochures at recreation centers. We have also reach out to, and in some instances met with DC government offices and organizations

who are focused on particular demographics, such as the Mayor's Offices of Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, African Affairs, Latino Affairs, the Office of Human Rights, and other similarly focused community-based organization, to ensure we reach the communities that need our services.

Furthermore, we have also participated in community and school based events (such as EdFEST and Carlos Rosario's education fair) and offered presentations about our office to share information about the services we provide. This participation also allows us to be available to talk with students and families about questions, concerns, or challenges regarding public education in DC.

Moreover, our office is also partnering with other community-based organizations to host parent organization development, leadership, and support trainings. Currently, our office is in the final planning stages for a parent organization development and leadership summit, which will be piloted in Ward 7. Our office is working in partnership with Ward 7 SBOE representative, Karen Williams, and the Ward 7 Education Council to create a series of events focused on supporting parent organizations in Ward 7, for both DCPS and public charter schools. This series is not only focused on equipping the organization with the tools to revive or establish a parent organization but will also focus on building capacity and will provide tools to support parents organizations in a way that ensures that they can thrive and have longevity, create systems of support/communication amongst parents and parent organizations, and while also fostering/leveraging parent power. In addition to the partnership with Ward 7, our office is also work with the Ward 5 Council on Education to create a public education parent advisory and leadership group in Ward 5.

Policy-Level Advocacy

As part of my work serving as the voice of the students and parents in the District, I have participated in numerous policy-level discussions in order to provide insight into the concerns of the community. To that end, I serve in the truancy and cross-sector collaboration taskforces, and have participated in Raise DC's Graduation Pathways

Summit, to name a few. I also participate in a host of community and grassroots level policy-focused conversations that take place throughout the city. Those conversations are some of the most engaging ones and great opportunities to continue to nurture and foster relationships with the students, parents, and communities that our office serves. As I continue my work with families, stakeholders, and coalitions, I look forward to developing and providing policy recommendations informed by and representative of the community I'm tasked to serve.

Conclusion

My work within the office has only just begun, and I am excited about the work ahead. Whether it's individual, group, or coalition wide support and discussion, my office's aim is to enable our students, parents, and families to become effective advocates for themselves in such a way that will thus impact their individual communities. Our ability to continue the work that we are currently doing and to fulfill the mandate of our office moving forward will be challenging without sufficient financial and appropriate staffing capacity. Currently, our office is staffed by one FTE, myself, a halftime Program Associate that I share with Office of the Ombudsman, and a part time fellow. This staffing model, in addition to the insufficient funding, does not appropriately support the work that we are currently doing nor the work that we are required to do statutorily.

The services that our office provides to students, parents, families, and our communities are without a question absolutely vital. The work that we have on the horizon is not only promising but it is also innovative and collaborative. We look forward to continuing to serve students, their families, and the broader community in a way that will allow them to be informed, be connected, and be empowered.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with the Council, city agencies, local organizations, students and their families. Not only to continue the work of our office but also to ensure that the voices of our students and parent are amplified and that their needs are at the forefront of the public education conversations in our city.

And I would be remiss if I did not share our office information. If students, parents, families, or any educator or community member would like to contact our office regarding any public education related question or concern, they can reach our office by calling us at (202) 741- 4692, emailing us at student.advocate@dc.gov, or visiting the State Board of Education website located at sboe.dc.gov/studentadvocate.

Again, thank you this opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions that you might have.